# GRACE HARLOWE'S OVERLAND RIDERS AT CIRCLE O RANCH

JESSIE GRAHAM FLOWER A.M.

"It's Pap!"

*Frontispiece*

# Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders at Circle O Ranch

By

JESSIE GRAHAM FLOWER, A.M.

Author of The High School Girls Series, The College Girls Series, The Grace Harlowe Overseas Series, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Old Apache Trail, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Great American Desert, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders Among the Kentucky Mountaineers, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders in the Great North Woods, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders in the High Sierras, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders in the Yellowstone National Park, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders in the Black Hills, etc., etc.

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# GRACE HARLOWE'S OVERLAND RIDERS AT CIRCLE O RANCH

## CHAPTER I

### PEACE IN THE COSO VALLEY

"DOES anyone know where we are at?" wondered Stacy Brown, the last person to leave his berth in the car that morning.

"We are in the Coso Valley," replied Grace Harlowe Gray.

"I never heard of it," returned Stacy. "We are still in Southern California, I presume."

"Of course. What a silly question!" interjected J. Elfreda Briggs laughingly.

"Young man, we are nearing our destination. If you don't make haste you will be left," reminded Grace's husband, Tom Gray.

"Left! What a tragedy!" murmured Emma Dean. "By the way, Chunky, did you dream

last night?" she added, placing a hand on the fat boy's arm.

"Of course I did. What's the fun in sleeping if you don't dream? I dreamed that I was the King of England, and you should have seen — "

"Stacy!" cried Emma in mock horror. "How unfortunate! To counteract the effect of that unhappy dream, try to-night to dream that you are a peasant. If you do not, some terrible misfortune is sure to overtake you."

"Piffle! Where do you get that stuff, Emma? All right, Thomas. I'll be ready by the time the train stops," added Stacy, addressing Tom Gray, and moving on to the wash room, where he remained until the train began to slow down for Carrago, their destination. Carrago was a sleepy little far-western town whose only excuse for existence was that it was the only trading center for the ranchers within a radius of many miles in the broad valley that lay between the Argus and Coso ranges, a remote section of the country selected by Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders for their regular summer's outing in the saddle.

The scenery that morning had held the attention of the entire party with the exception of Stacy, who had been too busy sleeping to give heed to mere scenery, and the passengers were already detraining at Carrago when he finally came rushing through the car.

"Shall I brush you off?" asked the porter, facing him, broom in hand.

"Brush me off?" frowned Stacy, who thus far had avoided the porter. "Well, no. I reckon that I'll just get off in the ordinary way," he added, hurrying out to the vestibule of the Pullman and down to the station platform.

"That was rude of you, Stacy," rebuked Miss Briggs, who had heard the boy's retort.

"Rude? Huh! Do you think I want to be brushed off the train?"

"Oh, Stacy! You are as hopeless as ever, aren't you?" laughed Grace. "Oh, this wonderful air!" she cried enthusiastically, turning to her companions. "Tom, aren't you going to look for the guide who was to meet us here?"

Tom Gray said that Hippy Wingate was attending to that, and just then the Overlanders saw him halt before two bewhiskered natives standing on the station platform side by side and assuming almost identically the same pose. Both were old men. Their faces were seamed and tanned, their shoulders stooped, and as they stood with heads tilted back until their long beards protruded at almost the same angle, they presented a picture that made the Overlanders smile.

"I am looking for Jim-Sam, who is to guide us," announced Hippy, addressing the men.

"We're Jim-Sam," answered the men in chorus. "Be ye the dudes?"

"Well, not exactly," interjected Stacy Brown.

"This is the party that engaged Jim-Sam," repeated Hippy patiently. "Which of you is Jim-Sam?"

"Both of us," added the taller of the two men. "I'm Sam, an' this heah galoot standin' side me is Jim, an' —"

"I'll have ye understand that I ain't no galoot," objected Jim heatedly, shaking a finger under Sam's nose.

"Hold on, you two! Let me get this clear," interposed Tom Gray, stepping up to them. "Do you mean that we have engaged, not one guide, but two?"

Sam explained that he and Jim were "pards," and that they had always worked together, and "fit an' died together" these many years, adding further, that Jim, being a spavined, ring-boned old cayuse wasn't much good to anyone, himself included, but that he could hold the horses and howl like a coyote at the pack-horses to keep them going.

"Haw, haw!" exploded Stacy.

"I don't know about this," muttered Hippy, removing his hat and mopping his forehead.

"Are you two gentlemen heavy eaters?" questioned Emma. "The reason I ask is, that we

already have two powerful eaters in this outfit, and I doubt if we could stand to feed more like them."

"We kin rustle our own grub," promised Jim.

"I suggest that we go into executive session and talk this over," urged Miss Briggs.

The suggestion was approved and the Overlanders withdrew for discussion, Jim and Sam holding their positions, apparently the most disinterested persons on the station platform. Inquiry developed that the salary named in the letter of Jim-Sam covered the services of both, so, after talking the matter over, the Overland Riders decided to take on this strange pair to guide them. The fact that the guides owned their own ponies and pack-mules was an added inducement. Otherwise it would be necessary to hire or buy pack-animals.

Hippy Wingate told the guides that they had been accepted, then he introduced each member of the party to them. Nora Wingate laughingly warned the pair that they were embarking on a perilous undertaking when they set out with the Overland Riders, whereat Jim-Sam's whiskers stiffened, but the owners made no reply.

Emma Dean, speaking confidentially to Hippy, objected to guides wearing such long whiskers, though she thought the men themselves might do very well. Emma was of the opinion that such

whiskers were not sanitary, and averred that if San Antone, who had guided them through the Black Hills, were present he would correct the fault by shooting off the whiskers without making the slightest fuss about it.

Tom interrupted Emma's conversation by urging that the Overland ponies be unloaded at once, the car containing them having, by this time, been shunted to a switch.

"When do ye reckon on gittin' out o' heah?" asked Sam.

"We shall be ready by the time you get your mules and packs ready," answered Hippy. "This outfit moves without fuss, but it occasionally makes quite a racket in doing so. Get busy, boys!"

Jim-Sam turned away, still side by side, each carrying himself with a dignity that made the Overlanders laugh. While the provisions and other equipment were being purchased by the women of the party, Tom and Hippy unloaded the ponies, and Stacy, uttering many grunts and groans, piled their equipment on the ground near the stock car. The ponies were then secured to the tie-rail in front of the general store, where they were looked over and felt of by every man in the village, including several cowboys from neighboring ranches.

During the unloading, Hippy and Tom had

noticed a cowboy sitting on a mustang some little distance from them, observing the Overland operations with keen interest.

"Who is that fellow?" asked Hippy of a bystander.

The native shook his head, and the horseman, seeing that he had attracted attention to himself, jerked his pony about and trotted away.

"I don't like the looks of that chap," declared Tom.

"I reckon he's all right. Most cowpunchers look tougher than they really are, though it is quite possible that we may meet up with some real rough-necks. I have heard that they are not difficult to find in the Coso range," replied Hippy.

"Oh, there come our heavenly twins," cried Emma, who had returned from the store with an armful of packages.

Jim and Sam had just appeared dragging a pair of unwilling mules, behind which, saddled and bridled, trailed two long-haired mustangs. The two men were alternately arguing and berating each other and threatening the mules.

"What kind of an outfit is this?" wondered Emma, her merry eyes regarding the scene.

"You may search me," was Hippy's laughing reply. "Here come the other girls. Good gracious! Where do they expect to stow all that stuff? Jim-Sam, pull up here and sling your

packs. Is that as fast as those mules can travel? If so you had better leave them at home."

The guides were too busy arguing to give heed to Hippy's words, but when they reached the station platform they took hold of the work with surprising alacrity and began rolling packs with skillful hands.

"What are they?" asked Emma, pointing to the lazy mules.

"Jest mules," answered Jim without looking up, and Sam echoed his statement. "Don't have to have no names. When my long-haired cayuse does somethin' he oughtn't, Sam gives him er kick, an' when Sam's critter cuts up capers I give his'n the boot."

"No names?" wondered Emma. "Yes, but what do you call them when you want them to come to you?"

"Missie, what we calls 'em sometimes ain't sootable fer a young woman to hear," grinned Jim.

"Then kindly see that you do not call them," retorted Emma, turning away.

The Overlanders observed that their guides now wore heavy revolvers and that the saddle-boot of each held a rifle, which aroused apprehension in the minds of at least two of the girls. Jim-Sam, however, assured them that the Coso Valley and the mountain ranges on either

side of it were as peaceful as "Sunday meetin'," and, further, that "nothin'" ever happened there. Something did threaten to happen, though, when it came to lashing the packs to the mules, and Jim-Sam instantly became involved in a violent argument as to how the packs should be "thrown," the two men in their anger shaking belligerent fists under each other's nose until they nearly came to blows.

"If I had a disposition like your'n I'd go shoot myself," raged Jim.

"If I was a cantankerous cuss like you I'd go live with the coyotes where I could snarl all day an' bark all night. Git outer my way afore I soak ye in the jaw!" threatened Sam.

"That's right, Sam. Hit him!" urged Stacy Brown. "He isn't any good."

"Yes, he is, too! Don't ye say nothin' agin my pardner. I ain't standin' fer nothin' like that."

"Here, here!" interrupted Tom Gray. "Stacy, let these men alone and pack your pony. Jim-Sam, you will stop your quarreling and do your work or we may change our minds about taking you along."

"You understand, we wish to head for the Bindloss ranch — the Circle O Ranch, I believe they call it. We do not know Bindloss, but we propose to get acquainted with him." Hippy grinned as he said it.

" This really promises to be a peaceful journey," observed Miss Briggs solemnly, whereat the Overland girls gave way to the merriment that for some moments they had been restraining, then preparations for the start were resumed with renewed speed and vigor.

Departure for the Circle O was made within an hour. The Circle O was a ranch where a friend of Lieutenant Hippy Wingate had put up while on a hunting trip in the mountains some time before, and it was because of what his friend had told him of Old Joe Bindloss and his ranch that Hippy decided to take in the Circle O on their summer's ride.

The start was accomplished to the accompaniment of shouts and yells from Jim-Sam to get the mules started and headed in the right direction as well as to keep them going. It was a task that proved too much for the old guides, who, finally, after getting well out in the valley, rode on ahead with the Overlanders. The pack-mules, finding themselves being left behind, increased their pace and soon caught up with the outfit.

" That's the way with mules. Contrary critters jest like some fellers I know of," volunteered Jim, giving Sam a withering glance. " If ye wants 'em to go back'ards jest try to drive 'em for'ards."

" An' then agin, some fellers is so gosh darn stubborn they won't go either way when ye tells

'em to go t'other," retorted Sam. "Folks, git yer appetites workin' fer we'll soon be eatin'."

Luncheon that first day was taken sitting on the sand by a water hole, and was a brief affair, for Jim-Sam had a camping place in mind, to reach which meant a long, hard ride. It was some time after nightfall when they arrived there, and still later when the lazy mules dragged themselves in, uttering long-drawn brays of satisfaction or dissatisfaction or whatever it might be. The animals were quickly relieved of their packs and turned loose to roll and feed on the desert sage through the night. All day long Jim-Sam had argued and quarreled, and by the time they made camp they had reached a point where they no longer spoke to each other.

"What are we going to do with them?" wondered Tom Gray frowningly.

"Keep them, of course," answered Grace. "Tom, they are a real treat, but if Stacy and Emma do not stop stirring them up we may have to send for the sheriff of the county. Just look at them now," she added laughingly.

Jim and Sam were sitting back to back unrolling packs, each man muttering to himself his opinion of the other. Later in the evening the Overlanders got them talking and drew the guides out. It developed that the pair had been prospectors nearly all their lives; that they had loved

and fought each other for so many years that they had lost count of them, and when their halting story had finally been finished, the Overland Riders looked upon Jim-Sam with new appreciation. Emma Dean characterized them as a pair of "beloved vagabonds."

This having been their first day in the saddle since the previous season, the Overlanders were saddle-weary, and some of them were sore and lame. Miss Briggs hobbled about painfully and complainingly, and Nora Wingate lay by the little campfire rolled in her blanket, the picture of woe. Emma and Grace, however, appeared not to be suffering the slightest degree of discomfort.

Jim cooked the supper, and it was a good one, for he made biscuit and served them hot, soaked in bacon gravy, a luxury to which the Riders had not been accustomed. They made the most of their opportunity, and Stacy Brown's appetite, as usual, was not fully satisfied until some time after his companions had finished supper. Then all hands gathered about the fire for a chat.

"Samuel, do you ever dream?" questioned Emma after thoughtfuly regarding the old guide for some moments.

"Sure I do, Missie. I dreamed last night that that critter — that ornery mule o' Jim's — kicked the everlasting daylight out o' me," growled Sam.

"Oh, you don't mean it? That was fine," glowed Emma.

"Eh?" Sam's whiskers stood out belligerently. The old guide's whiskers could express varying shades of emotion.

"Your dream means that you are going to have good luck — the best ever. Perhaps you are about to discover a gold mine or a hole in the ground where one has been, or something like that," bubbled Emma.

"Wrong up here again," muttered Stacy Brown, significantly tapping his head with a finger.

"I should say that Emma has read one of those five-cent dream books," suggested Miss Briggs.

"It is my opinion that she has been fitting herself for a lunatic seminary — cemeter — sanitarium," corrected Stacy.

"Tell us about it," urged Grace, smiling over at Miss Dean.

"I will if you folks won't laugh at me. I am a student of Professor Freud's new science of dreams," announced Emma with dignity. "The professor has demonstrated beyond question that there is an imponderable quality within us — "

"You mean hot biscuit and gravy," interjected Hippy Wingate. "Since I overate this evening I surely have an imponderable quality in my midst," he added amid much laughter.

Emma elevated a disdainful chin.

"I see nothing funny in a scientific discussion," she retorted. "As I was about to say when so rudely interrupted, Professor Freud has conclusively proved that every dream has its meaning — that the imponderable quality in the subconscious mind never ceases to work; that it even works when we sleep, and — "

"Old Subconscious ought to join a union," suggested Stacy.

"And that, if we will but learn a few simple rules, we shall be able to interpret those dreams and be better able to avoid many perils as well as to take advantage of real opportunities. Always let the imponderable quality have its way," urged Emma.

Jim-Sam's whiskers drooped, and the Overlanders repressed their laughter.

"Perhaps you yourself might dream out the solution of a mystery for us," suggested Grace. "I mean as to the identity and purpose of the horseman who has been riding a parallel course with us all day, evidently keeping us under observation."

The guides gave her a quick, keen look.

"Miss, I reckon as ye ain't no tenderfoot," observed Sam dryly.

"A man following us?" cried Nora. "It has come already! I knew it would. I knew that

trouble would follow this outfit, just as it has done from the moment we set out over the Old Apache Trail right on down until we ended our vacation in the Black Hills last summer."

Others of the party had observed the solitary horseman, but had attached no particular significance to his traveling in the same direction that they were following.

"Watching us, do you think?" wondered Emma.

"What about him, Jim-Sam?" demanded Tom Gray.

"Wal, I reckons mebby he is the feller that was hangin' 'round when ye folks was unloadin' at Carrago. He was a snoopin', an' I don't reckon as he was doin' it fer no good. I didn't like the look of him nohow," growled Jim.

"Ye ain't dreamed nothin' 'bout that, has ye, Miss Dean?" asked Sam.

"No. Not yet. However, in case it means trouble for us either I or one of the others will get a reaction in advance and —"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Hippy. "A reaction in advance! That surely is a new one. Were Freud to hear that he himself surely would have a bad attack of nightmare."

"I mean that one of us will feel that imponderable quality stirring within us," explained Emma, her color rising. "We shall know. No harm

can come to us without our being warned in advance. I—"

A volley of revolver shots punctuated the silence of the desert night — shots close at hand, accompanied by yells, hoots and howls, and the thudding of many unshod hoofs.

## CHAPTER II

### ON THE ROAD TO TROUBLE

"MERCIFUL heaven! What is that?" cried Nora Wingate, the color rushing to her cheeks, then instantly receding, leaving them blanched with fear.

The Overland Riders were, for the moment, too startled to move, and it was Jim and Sam who first sprang to their feet.

"Look out! They aire comin'!" warned Sam.

The girls ran for the protection of their tents, with the exception of Emma Dean, who appeared to be too frightened to stir. Tom and Hippy were on their feet a second or so behind Jim-Sam, each with a hand on his revolver holster, while Stacy had disappeared on the dark side of his tent. Stacy Brown always believed in safety first,

and he seldom lost many seconds in applying that principle.

All this occurred within the space of a few seconds, during which the shooting and the shouting had ceased, but the hoof-beats of ponies sounded much nearer to the camp. Then the Overlanders saw them. Wild riders they were, shadowy figures in the night, keeping just beyond the flickering rays shed by the campfire, but circling the camp, racing their mustangs. Once more their shrill penetrating yells split the silence, followed by a rattling fire of revolver shots.

"They're shootin' into the air. They don't mean no harm. Keep steady!" urged Jim.

"Shoo them off, Jim-Sam! Somebody will be shooting lower than that if this keeps on for many minutes," warned Hippy Wingate.

"Git out o' this, ye galoots!" yelled Sam as one rider, bolder than the others, drove his pony right through the camp. The animal hurdled the campfire and ran between two of the Overland tents. Yells from his companions greeted the achievement.

The night rider repeated the performance, but this time Jim-Sam fired at the same instant, one bullet snipping off the rider's hat, the other fanning the hind hoofs of the pony.

"Now you've done it, you poor, crazy coyote!" roared Sam.

"I didn't. You did it yourself. I fanned the critter's feet," retorted Jim. "Look out, they're comin' fer keeps this time!"

They were.

The wild night riders had circled out on the desert until joined by the man who had twice ridden through the Overland camp, then they drove their ponies straight at the camp, uttering thrilling yells and shooting into the air. They were upon the camp before the Overland Riders fully realized what their attackers were doing. The man in the lead rode down the little tent beside which Stacy Brown was in hiding, and Stacy, who had armed himself with a tent stake, hurled it at the fellow as he passed. The stake reached its mark — the neck of the rider — and the man sagged in his saddle as the pony rushed on into the darkness.

"I hit him!" yelled Stacy.

The rest of the riders went through with a rush.

"Do that agin' an' I'll wing ye!" howled Sam.

The attackers did it again. The tents no longer being a safe refuge, the girls ran out and stood by the campfire so that the night riders might see and avoid them. Emma stood a few yards from them, where she had been standing since the excitement began. This time the riders rode down the rest of the tents, with weapons still shooting into the air.

Sam had returned his revolver to its holster, but a nervous hand trembled on the butt of the weapon — trembled not because of any fear of its owner, but because all the nervous tension of a trained gunman was centered in it. The riders were growing wilder with each passing second, and Sam was growing proportionately calmer, with shoulders slouched forward and whiskers standing out at a sharper angle. It was plain that nothing short of shooting with intent to wound or kill could stay the orgy of those wild night riders and their mustangs whose flashing heels were a peril to every member of the Overland party. Both Jim and Sam, knowing that aggressive action on their part would bring down the wrath of the riders, hesitated.

There came a moment, however, when restraint was no longer possible. The horsemen had cleared the camp and were turning for another sweep over it when a rider on a dust-covered pony came galloping into the light of the campfire.

"Whoo-pee!" he howled, his lariat in a great loop spinning over his head.

"Look out!" roared Jim warningly, for he saw where the rope was going to drop.

His warning failed of its purpose. The lariat came down in a flash, and the great loop, holding its form in a perfect circle, dropped neatly over the head of Emma Dean.

At first Emma did not realize what had happened, but as the coil suddenly tightened about her waist she uttered a scream. Her feet left their footing and Emma measured her length on the ground, the coil gripping her tighter and tighter, though the roper had checked the speed of his mustang and was letting the rope slip slowly through his hands.

Sam's hand was trembling on the butt of his revolver more agitated than before. The trembling ceased suddenly, and there followed a twitch of the wrist, a flash, and a sharp report. The roper uttered a yell and let go of his lariat. Sam's shot had shattered his wrist.

Hippy sprang to Emma and freed her of the lariat.

"Git down!" yelled Sam. "The varmits is goin' to shoot!"

The "varmits" shot lower this time, but every member of the Overland party had taken to the shadows and thrown themselves down, as the rider who had roped Emma dashed out holding his wounded wrist, yelling to his companions to take it out of the man who had shot him.

By this time Tom and Hippy had gotten their rifles and were watching and waiting, fully expecting further and more serious trouble. It came in the shape of another charge of the night riders. This time their yells were savage. The

new note in them told the Overlanders what was coming.

"Let 'em have it, fellers!" urged Jim.

"Girls, keep down!" called Grace Harlowe, as Emma Dean once more stood up. "Isn't once enough for you?"

Emma permitted herself to sink to the ground, just in time to avoid a rattling fire of revolver shots from the raiders.

At this juncture, Jim and Sam let go with their heavy revolvers, followed a few seconds later by the crash of the two Overland rifles. That some of their bullets had taken effect the Overlanders knew by the angry yells of their attackers. A rider's pony went down on its nose at the very edge of the camp and its rider plunged forward to the ground, whereupon the pony staggered to its feet and limped away, but the rider lay where he had fallen.

"Jim-Sam, don't kill 'em!" begged Tom Gray. "Drive 'em off, that's all."

The fellow's companions, leaning from saddles, dragged the wounded man away, whence he was flung on a mustang and carried off, but how badly the fellow was hurt the Overlanders had no means of knowing. They kept on shooting just the same, backed up now by the weapons of Jim-Sam, and it took but a few shots from the heavy weapons to drive the raiders away.

"Now, ye infernal idiot! Do ye reckon ye've done enough fer one night?" demanded Jim sarcastically.

"I reckon I done too much when I saved yer miserable hide from them raiders," flung back Sam. "Anybody git hurt?"

"I believe that I am the only casualty, but it was only my feelings that were hurt by the fall that my pride got," replied Emma. "This is indeed a peaceful valley, isn't it, Sam? Nothing ever happens here. Oh, no!"

Suppressed chuckles greeted Emma's retort, but Jim and Sam had already run out of camp to make certain that the raiders had really gone away. The guides found that they had departed, but fearing that the attackers might return, they decided to watch the camp for the rest of the night.

The Overland Riders, acting upon the suggestion of Sam, were putting out the fire and beginning to get the camp in condition for sleeping, when Stacy Brown strolled into the scene. He had not been seen since the attack began.

"My tent is all down and torn," he complained.

"So are others," reminded Nora. "What shall we do about it?"

"Nothing until daylight," answered Tom briefly.

"I suppose I am responsible for driving those

ruffians away," boasted the fat boy. "I hit that fellow an awful wallop with a tent stake when he went past me, and that made the rest of the gang more careful. Think of it! I didn't have to fire a shot to do it, either!"

"Yes. You did it all, little man. But if you love us, never again dream that you are the King of England or the Emperor of the Cannibal Islands. I read in that dream of yours that something terrible was going to happen. Oh, Sam! That was a wonderful shot of yours," she complimented glowingly, turning to the guide as he stalked in, combing his whiskers with his hand. "It was perfectly adorable of you to shoot that fellow after he had roped me. And such a shot! Did you mean to hit him in the wrist or did you shoot at the pony's feet?" questioned Emma innocently.

Sam's whiskers bristled.

"I reckon I hit what I shot at," he answered briefly.

"How wonderful! I wish I could shoot like that." She tapped his holster, and smiled up into the weatherbeaten face.

"You kin. I'll larn ye, Missie. You've got the feel of a gun in yer make-up. We'll talk about it later on."

"Yes," agreed Tom Gray. "Other matters are of more importance at the moment. What have

you to say about the attack on us? What does it mean?"

"I reckon they aire a lot of wild cowboys that wanted to have some fun with us," drawled Sam.

"No. I don't agree with you," spoke up Grace. "They were too savage for men bent on having fun with a party of campers. I have been wondering if the mysterious horseman, that kept abreast of us all day, had anything to do with the raid?"

"Cowboys on a spree," persisted Sam.

"Ain't no such thing," interjected Jim, coming in in time to hear his partner's assertion. "Any galoot with a spoonful o' brains under his hair would know better 'n that. Them's wild horse hunters!"

"Huh! Know it all, don't ye?" leered Sam.

"Have to, bein' as I'm hitched up with you."

The laughter of the Overlanders put an end to the argument of the two guides, following which preparations for the night were resumed. It was decided not to try to mend the tents until daylight, which meant that some of the party must sleep on the ground in the open. J. Elfreda Briggs objected loudly.

"There are rattlesnakes here! I saw one today. What if one should crawl into my blanket in the night? I know I should die of fright."

"Silly!" rebuked Emma. "If such a thing

should occur, I'll tell you what to do. Don't move a muscle nor make a sound, but call for Sam, and he will shoot the head off the reptile without so much as disturbing your rest."

"Emma Dean, your logic is overwhelming. As a lawyer I fully appreciate it, and I thank you for the suggestions. Without moving and without speaking, I will yell for Sam and he will fan my cheek with a bullet, and during it all I shall slumber on as peacefully as a babe in its cradle. Lovely!"

"Never mind the snakes. Turn in!" ordered Hippy.

An hour later the camp was asleep and just outside of it prowled Jim and Sam, halting to growl at each other when they met on their rounds. Only once during the night was the quiet disturbed. About two o'clock in the morning Jim-Sam heard a body of horsemen moving. It was but a faint thudding that was borne to their ears, and after listening for some time they heard the hoof-beats die away in the distance.

"Glad we ain't got to do no more shootin'," observed Sam. "Might wake up the gals and that shore would be too bad. Say, Jim, that little Missie Dean, with the freckled face like a speckled trout, shore's got spunk."

"A-huh! Mebby she'll lend ye some of it," retorted Jim.

"Shet up!" growled Sam, and strode away for another round of the camp.

A pack of coyotes at this juncture barked in a yelping chorus, and the Overlanders heard them but only faintly, for it was now a familiar sound to them after their many nights in the wilder places of their native land.

Morning dawned bright and beautiful. The day promised to be warm, and, as Elfreda Briggs opened her eyes, her first thought was of snakes; and her next, the sweet, pungent, penetrating fragrance of sage which lay heavy on the morning air. A cautious investigation showed that no serpent had taken refuge in her blanket, whereat Elfreda Briggs heaved a deep sigh of relief.

Sam stood a short distance from her, whiskers standing out, shading his eyes with a hand as he gazed over the surrounding country. He stood straight like an Indian, and Elfreda found herself studying this strange old man of the hills and the desert — studying him with a new interest. He was rather above medium height with the small hips of a rider. His eyes were faintly gray, and his was the lean, strong face of the man of the open, a face that was lined with wrinkles, and as he gazed there was a look of nobility about it that held her fascinated.

The guide turned suddenly and saw her. He smiled and passed a hand over his whiskers.

"What is it, Sam?" questioned Elfreda.

"Mornin'! Nothin' but a little cloud o' dust. Might have been made by a hoss or a little wind-pocket."

The Overlanders now began to sit up and rub their eyes.

"Breakfast is nigh ready. That no 'count pard o' mine is fryin' the bacon an' I reckon he's boiled the coffee till it ain't fit to feed to coyotes," observed Sam.

"Do coyotes drink coffee?" questioned Emma, blinking in the strong morning light.

"I reckon they takes somethin' like that to keep 'em awake nights," answered Sam, whereat the Overlanders laughed and began throwing off their blankets, all now fully awake.

The camp looked to be a wreck, but a hurried examination revealed that it was not as bad as it looked. There were rents in the flattened tents that would call for the work of the women to repair, and some of the packs had been trampled on by the raiding ponies.

It was decided to put tents and equipment in condition before starting out, and this took nearly half of the forenoon, so the start was not made until after luncheon.

Not a human being had been seen all that morning, nothing of a disturbing nature had occurred except the dust cloud that Sam had dis-

covered. A few hours after they set out, however, a horseman was discovered in the far distance, sitting motionless in his saddle. He did not move until the Overland party had proceeded some two miles, whereupon he started along on a parallel course.

"It is our mysterious horseman, I am positive," announced Grace, after a long look through her binoculars.

At Hippy's suggestion the party changed their course and headed directly for the course that the stranger was following. Shortly after that he too changed his course. Several similar experiments were made by the Overlanders, and always with the same result. It became plain to them that the mysterious horseman was keeping them under observation, but for what reason not even Jim-Sam seemed to be able to guess.

These deviations had carried the Overlanders some distance out of their way, and to reach their proposed camping place for that night would necessitate traveling after dark, so the guides decided to camp at the nearest water hole, which proved to be located in the foothills. There the foliage was greener and fresher, and bunches of grass made fine grazing for the ponies.

Supper was an enjoyable affair that evening, especially so because Jim and Sam enlivened the occasion by wrangling over the way that Jim had

cooked the beans for their mess. Jim, finally becoming too enraged to eat, got up and stalked away, whereupon Sam gravely ate his own portion, and then finished all that Jim had left.

The party had barely finished supper when the familar hoof-beats of a rapidly riding party of horsemen were heard. The Overlanders were on their feet in an instant, each member of the party hurriedly throwing on his holster, then looking to Jim-Sam for orders.

" I reckon nobody ain't goin' to do no shootin' till I've had a first crack at the cayuses," ordered Sam.

The Overland Riders tensed their muscles and their nerves for what they believed was to be a battle in earnest.

## CHAPTER III

### AN INVITATION TO MOVE

"THEY'VE stopped!" breathed Grace.

"One of 'em hain't, answered Jim. "He's comin' on."

"Jim-Sam, you sit tight, both of you. I'll talk with him," said Hippy, stepping forward a little to get the light of the campfire at his back.

A man on a gray bronco rode out of the shadows at a slow trot, and pulled up a few yards from the camp where he sat surveying the outfit. No one spoke, but the Overlanders were ready for any hostile move.

After a few seconds the horseman slipped from his saddle, tossed the bridle-rein over the pommel, and clanked towards the Overlanders. Hippy stepped forward to meet him. The newcomer was short and swarthy. He wore a Mexican sombrero, fancifully decorated; a gun swung at his hip and a row of brass-tipped cartridges showed in his belt. Black, searching eyes swept from one to another of the Overland Riders,

finally returning to Hippy Wingate and resting on him with a challenge in their depths.

"Well! Now that you have given us the once-over, what's the big idea?" demanded Hippy.

"Who be you?" snapped the horseman.

"I might ask the same question."

"Don't git funny. It ain't healthy," warned the fellow.

"We are here for reasons best known to ourselves, which can be of no interest to you. Are you one of the party that attacked us last night?"

"No, I don't know nothin' 'bout that."

"Then what do you want here?"

"To tell you to git out! You ain't got no business here. Pack up an' mush out o' this, an' if you don't do it fast enough I've got boys that'll help you along."

Jim-Sam were getting nervous, but they were obeying orders. Tom Gray stepped forward and asked the reason for the stranger's demand.

"These heah is grazin' grounds fer stock, and the man that owns them don't 'low no others on his land. Yer stock is eatin' up the grass that belongs to his cattle, so you'll have to hike out of this heah valley, and do it quick."

"Stranger! Who is this feller that owns this range?" drawled Sam.

"Hornby! Malcolm Hornby of the 'Double Q' ranch," was the prompt reply.

"Stranger, I ain't particular 'bout stirrin' up trouble, bein' an old man and a little rheumatic in the joints, an' 'specially in the trigger finger, but what would ye say if I said ye was a liar?" asked Sam half humorously, though the expression in his eyes was not in harmony with his tone.

"I reckon I'd kill ye whar ye stand!" shot back the fellow, flushing hotly under his tan.

"So?" nodded the guide.

"Is what this man says the truth?" demanded Tom Gray, turning to Sam.

"This heah land don't b'long to Hornby. Mebby he grazes his stock heah, but this grass don't b'long to nobody. We got as much right to graze our stock heah as he has, an' that's all that's to say 'bout it."

"You have your answer, Mr. Man. I don't know your game, but it is my opinion that you are not only what this gentleman has called you, but that you are bad medicine as well," declared Tom Gray, looking the caller squarely in the eyes.

"Meanin' that I'm a liar?"

"I reckon that's about the size of it."

"Get out of here!" commanded Hippy sharply. "We can take care of ourselves."

The stranger's hand flew to his holster, but there the hand paused.

"Easy thar! Don't draw," warned Sam whose own right hand hovered near his weapon. "It

ain't safe. You might hurt somebody, or mebby I might hurt you, an' that wouldn't do nohow before these young women who don't like to see a feller git hurt. But if you've got to draw, pint your gun this way an' mebby I ain't too old or my rheumatiz ain't too crinkly so that I can't dodge yer bullet."

The stranger's hand closed over the butt of his revolver and half drew the weapon from its holster. It drew no further, for the fellow suddenly found himself facing Sam's weapon, which had been drawn with a speed that must have been a revelation to him, because his face reflected amazement, as well as rage.

"If ye must shoot that gun off, take my advice an' come 'round in the daytime when ye can see better, an' we'll fit it out man to man. But git! This ain't no company fer a feller like you who can't talk without a gun in his hand. Be ye goin'?"

"Yes, but I'll come back and you'll be the one to git," the fellow flung at him, turning abruptly on his heel.

"Hol' on a minute thar!" commanded the guide. "Don't try to start nothin' at all heah. These friends of mine an' these fine young women has seen yer kind before an' they'd as lief shoot as not. Go back to Hornby, if he sent ye, an' tell him to come out hisself if he is so tarnation

'fraid we'll spile this grass. Jest a word more. We'll watch ye an' if ye try any tricks we'll shoot. That's all I've got to say to ye."

"You'll hear from me!" shouted the departing caller as he flung himself into his saddle.

"I hear ye now, but yer voice sounds like as if ye was afraid of somethin'," drawled Sam.

The fellow rode away without another word.

"Follow him, Sam!" urged Grace. "We don't know but they may rush us, just as the raiders did last night," warned Grace.

"Leave it to Jim. He's out thar an' Jim kin trail a canary bird without the bird ever knowin' it. Jim'll give us the word if them fellers try any of their fancy tricks."

"Oh, Samuel, why didn't you shoot while you had an excuse for doing so?" begged Emma.

The Overlanders laughed. They knew Emma and they did not take her suggestion seriously.

Half an hour later, during which time the Overland Riders had remained quietly alert, Jim came stalking in, stroking his whiskers.

"Have they gone?" questioned the Overlanders in chorus.

"I reckon they knowed what was good for 'em, so they skedaddled," replied Jim.

"Which way an' whar did they go?" demanded Sam.

"West! How do I know whar they went?"

"If you was half a man you would know. You ain't no more 'count, an' not half so much use, as that tarnation mule that carries yer pack. But it ain't your fault, an' I reckon I oughter not set so much store by you. A feller can't be blamed much because he was borned with half a teaspoonful of brains in his haid," raged Sam.

"I s'pose ye think you an' that mule of yourn has all the brains in this heah outfit. Wal, I reckon you're part right 'cause you an' the mule has got some brains, but when the Lord made ye he got you two mixed. He thought you was the mule, so he give you the mule's brains an' the mule got yourn. I reckon — "

"Oh, shet up, will ye? " snarled Sam savagely, tugging viciously at his whiskers, while a gale of laughter swept over the Overland Riders. Jim and Sam did not speak to each other again that night, but glared as they met in their prowling about in ceaseless vigil of the camp.

The next morning found the guides still deadly enemies, but after breakfast Emma cleared the clouds away by making a disparaging remark about Jim to Sam, whereupon Sam promptly came to the defense of his partner, and Jim heard it.

A late start was made, the guides having informed their charges that they were only a few hours' ride from Old Joe Bindloss's "Circle O" ranch. An hour after the start they again dis-

covered what they believed to be their mysterious horseman, but he disappeared shortly after luncheon and was seen no more, and the Overland Riders, making a sharp turn to the right, now headed towards the purple haze behind which lay the foothills and the mountains of the Coso range, where adventure awaited them.

## CHAPTER IV

### AT THE "CIRCLE O" RANCH

CAMP was pitched in the foothills about four o'clock that afternoon. Grazing lands stretched away parallel with the mountain range as far as the eye could see, and then were swallowed up in that everlasting purple haze.

Father along the valley in the opposite direction they could make out the buildings of the Bindloss ranch, to which Sam said they would ride in the morning, as Hippy Wingate wished to introduce himself to the owner.

Cattle were grazing all along the foothills, hundreds of them, and those close at hand were observed to have the brand of the "Circle O"

ranch. They were part of the great herd belonging to Old Joe Bindloss, a rich rancher, a hard man, according to Sam, but respected as a just one.

Cowboys riding in to the ranch-house for supper gazed curiously at the outfit that was making camp, for it was seldom that anything of the sort was seen in the Coso Valley. Arriving at their headquarters the cowboys reported what they had seen. Shortly after supper the Overland Riders were again disturbed, and half a dozen cowboys rode up in a cloud of dust, sweeping off their hats as they pulled down their mustangs at the very edge of the camp. Their attitude was stern, but not unfriendly, and the Overlanders surmised that they were from the "Circle O" ranch, which they soon learned was the fact.

"The Old Man wants to know who you be and what you are doin' heah," announced the spokesman. "He 'lows thet he don't like no strangers foolin' 'round whar the stock is, and he says it'll please him if you move on."

"Say! This is a hospitable country, isn't it?" cried Stacy Brown. "Since I have been here, about all I have heard is, 'Get out or get shot up!' Funny thing about it, though, is that we haven't 'got' and we haven't been 'shot up.'"

"Be quiet, Stacy!" admonished Grace.

"Please go back and tell Mr. Bindloss that it

is Lieutenant Hippy Wingate, and his friends from the east. Lieutenant Wingate is a friend of Captain Gordon who was out here some time ago on a hunting trip. Say to Mr. Bindloss that if he objects to our camping here, we will go on up into the range and make camp there," answered Hippy.

"Wal, the Old Man reckoned thet if ye didn't go we was to fetch ye back whether ye wanted to come or not, but seein' as thar's ladies heah mebby we won't have to take only the men," answered the spokesman doubtfully.

"Listen, Buddy! You go back and tell the Old Man to come and fetch us himself if he wants to see us. Tell him Lieutenant Wingate said so," directed Hippy laughingly.

The cowboys hesitated, surveyed the Overland outfit keenly, then, whirling their ponies, dashed away towards the "Circle O" ranch.

"Another one invites us to get out," murmured Emma. "How exciting!"

An hour later a bellowing "halloo" informed the Overland Riders that they were about to receive another caller, and they surmised who it was. The hail was answered in kind, then a horseman trotted in and hopped off. He was a big, powerful-looking man, his face hard, probably from exposure, but the cold gray eyes now held a sparkle that was reassuring.

"I'm Joe Bindloss. Where's the duffer who dared me to come after him?"

"I'm the duffer," answered Hippy, stepping forward.

"Shake!" rumbled Old Joe Bindloss. "Any friend of Cap'n Gordon is a friend of mine. We've had to be kinder careful out here lately because there's been some rustling done and the word has been passed that there's a big gang — a regular gang of thieves, that's working this section under all sorts of disguises."

"Meet *our* gang, Mr. Bindloss; every one a rustler, but not the kind you are looking for," said Hippy laughingly. He then introduced the rancher to the members of the Overland party, and lastly to the guides. Bindloss peered at Sam.

"Wal, strike me dead if it ain't Sam Conifer!" shouted the rancher, extending a mighty paw to Sam and another to Jim. "Do you folks savvy this feller you've got here? You better savvy him if you know what's good for you. Sam, if you want to do the 'Circle O' a great big favor you just get wise to the feller that's stealing stock, but give him a chance to draw so you can plug him proper. Come on up to the ranch-house."

Hippy said they had intended to do so in the morning, and then asked the rancher if he knew a man named Hornby. Bindloss's face darkened and a heavy scowl wrinkled his forehead.

"I reckon I do. He and I don't hook up nohow, but he's got a daughter that I reckon I wish was mine. Judy is a peach and you ought to know her. Why do you ask me about Mal Hornby?"

Tom Gray explained that they had been ordered to leave the grazing grounds on the other side of the valley, and that the demand had been made in Hornby's name. He also told Bindloss about the raid of the night before.

"A-huh! Hornby ain't got no call to tell you to get out. A Mexican feller, you say? Probably one of the half-breeds that you'll find all over the ranges, and a bad lot they are, too. I don't reckon Hornby had to do with that."

"Who do you think the raiders were?" questioned Grace.

"How do I know? I reckon, though, that mebby they were sent after you. Somebody don't want you folks hangin' 'round these diggin's, but I reckon that Sam Conifer can take care of them. Eh, Sam?"

"I reckon, but honest, Joe, my rheumatiz crinkles my fingers so that I can't throw a gun any more, let alone pulling the trigger," complained Sam.

Bindloss laughed uproariously.

"The feller who reckons on gettin' you because of your rheumatiz is a dead man before he leaves home that day. Say, folks, the boys are

having a little shindy in the ranch-house this evenin', and they'd be mighty pleased to have you all come over. The boys are a rough gang, but they will treat you fine, you ladies."

"What kind of a shindy?" asked Nora.

"A dance. They have a fiddle and a fellow who scrapes it, and they may walk on your toes, but they'll feel worse about it than you do."

"Oh, goodie!" A dance! Of course we will go. Come on, folks. Oh, Mr. Bindloss, do you ever dream?" asked Emma soberly.

"Help!" murmured J. Elfreda.

"Why, yes. I reckon I do, like everybody else does when they get outside of too much chuck," laughed the rancher.

"Do you ever make a psycho-analysis of your dreams, Mr. Bindloss?" questioned Emma, laying a hand on the rancher's arm and gazing up into his eyes.

"Eh? Eh? A what?" he stammered.

"You should learn to read your dreams. Freud says that all dreams mean something — ungratified desires in life — imponderable somethings that may mean great happiness, great sorrows, disaster — any number of fine or frightful things. If you will tell me about your dreams I will search out the imponderable quality in them and —"

"Ride out, Miss Dean! Quick! Use your spurs because —"

"Don't be alarmed," begged Elfreda. "She never gets violent. We are in hopes that the mountain air may do her good." The Overland Riders burst out laughing, which, after a look at Emma, Old Joe Bindloss joined in with a bellowing laugh.

"Try that on the boys. They'll be plumb locoed," rumbled Bindloss. "Are you going with me?"

"Of course we are," answered Emma. "Where's my horse?"

"I have ridden every foot that I am going to ride today," protested Miss Briggs. "Let's walk."

The distance to the ranch being only about a mile the Overlanders decided that they would walk, and the rancher, assuring them that their stock and equipment would not be disturbed, Jim-Sam welcomed the opportunity to accompany them. Bindloss led his mustang and walked with them, and between Emma Dean's quaint humor and Stacy Brown's broader fun-making, Bindloss was kept in a roar most of the way home.

He explained that he had no family, and that he seldom saw people of the outside world except when he went to town, which was only at rare intervals. He said that his men were preparing for a round-up and that within a few days a bunch of his cowboys would start with a drove of cattle

for the north. He led his new friends to the dance-house, which was the cowboys' bunk-house, and there he introduced them to that rollicking crowd.

The fiddler stopped playing the moment the party appeared in the bunk-house.

Sierra Joe, Squint Nevada, Sallie, and Two-gun Peters, were among the names that rolled readily from the tongue of the rancher as he introduced his men to the Overland Riders.

"And if they don't talk you to death I reckon they'll dance you to death," warned the rancher, grinning at his men. "Scrape, you lazy lout!" he roared to the fiddler.

The cowboys were shy, and stood about awkwardly, avoiding the eyes of the girls who were smiling invitingly.

"See here, boys, aren't you going to ask us to dance?" cried Emma. "No? Then I am going to ask you. Two-gun Peters, I like your name. It is a perfectly adorable name, and I want to dance with you. If you are half as handy with your feet as your name indicates that you are with your revolver, we'll have a heavenly dance. Shake your feet, Peter!"

There was laughter from the Overlanders, a bellowing laugh from Joe Bindloss and sheepish grins from Two-gun Peters and his fellows, as Emma grabbed him and began waltzing about

with him. Then the other girls of the party selected their partners, and in a few moments the cowboys were dancing, milling about as if they were herding cattle at a round-up. Stamping feet, shrill cries from the fiddler and an occasional howl from Stacy Brown, who was doing an Indian dance by himself, made the old bunk-house ring, and raised the dust until the room was bathed in a yellow haze.

Jim and Sam, grinning and pulling their whiskers, were watching the fun and trying to talk to Bindloss, but the old rancher was having altogether too good a time to say much to them.

"I wish Judy was over here. She'd see somethin' worth while," he finally confided to Tom Gray.

"Two-gun, do you ever dream?" Emma was saying as she swept past them with her partner.

"Why — I — I reckon I do," admitted Two-gun. "Why?"

"Did you ever hear of a man named Freud, the world's most scientific interpreter of dreams?" questioned the little freckle-faced girl gazing soulfully up into the eyes of the big cowboy.

"I shore did heah of a feller of thet name. He was a cattle rustler an' I reckon he's havin' a long dream, 'cause they caught him and hanged him up on Rainy Mountain 'bout three year ago. He shore was some rustler, an' thar's some others

of the same kind that aire goin' the same way when we kotch up with 'em."

"Oh, no! That isn't the man I mean. The one I refer to is a great scientist who has discovered that there is an imponderable quality in each of us, and through his method of psychoanalysis he is able to throw the spot-light on that imponderable quality and —"

"Bang! Bang!"

Two quick shots fired from somewhere beyond the open door of the bunk-house startled every one in the room. One bullet passed through Sam Conifer's whiskers, and the other grazed the dress of Emma Dean who was dancing past him at that instant.

Sam's weapon was out of its holster with a movement so speedy that no one saw him draw it. Two shots rang out from the guide's weapon, one shattering the hanging lamp, the other following close upon the first, but fired through the open door. The room was plunged into deep darkness, with the odor of burnt powder heavy on the air.

## CHAPTER V

### OVERLANDERS SUFFER A LOSS

"SHOOT, Sam! Shoot, I tell you!" It was Emma Dean's voice that broke the silence of the room. Sam's answer was lost in the chorus of yells uttered by the enraged cowboys, who made a rush for the door, with Joe Bindloss charging after them and shouting orders.

"Get the critter! Drill him! Don't let him get away," yelled the rancher. "You women stay here till we find out what's doing. There may be some shooting, and there surely will be if I ketch sight of the coyote who did that."

Jim-Sam had strolled out behind the others, the least excited of the party. They reasoned that the person who fired the shot into the room, evidently with the intention of hitting Sam Conifer, would not be found outside waiting to be caught. It was a pot shot and it had missed, but the shooter, by this time, no doubt was well on his way to safety.

Jim began snooping about, but the night was

too dark to enable him to find what he was looking for, and the girls, not to be denied, stepped out.

"Here! Take my pocket lamp," said Grace, thrusting it into his hand.

"Thankee, Miss," growled Jim, and began sweeping the rays from the lamp over the ground in front of the bunk-house door. "Here's whar the critter stood when he let go," announced Jim. "Anybody recognize them boot-prints?"

No one did, and Jim went on nosing out the trail, which he followed for several rods down the valley, though the footprints were mixed with the tracks of cowpunchers and ponies. Jim continued his tracking until he reached a point where the shooter had met and mounted a pony, on which he dashed away straight for the hills. Those hoof-prints were of keen interest to Jim-Sam. They were the prints of unshod hoofs, and the two men looked at each other with a meaning gaze.

"I reckon the feller was shootin' with his left hand, an' that's why he missed," observed Sam.

"I reckon," agreed Jim.

"What have you got, Conifer?" called Joe Bindloss, dashing up on his pony.

The men explained what they had found, and the old rancher raged and stormed, declaring that he would get the fellow, that he would set his

cowpunchers on the trail at once to follow it until they did get the man.

"Ain't no use," objected Sam. "Can't do nothin' till daylight, an' then it'll be too late. I'll know that hoof-print when I see it."

"I reckon I know it now," spoke up Jim.

"What's that?" demanded Blindloss.

"You do?" wondered Sam.

"Shore, I do. It's Mrs. Gray's pony. He lost a shoe yesterday an' the others was loose, an' she was intendin' to have him shod all around, after I'd pulled off the rest of the shoes," was the guide's startling announcement.

"Come back to the bunk-house. We've got to find out about this," growled Bindloss.

On their way back they met the Overlanders coming along. Unable to restrain their curiosity, the Overlanders had followed their guides down the valley.

"Mrs. Gray, would you know the hoof-prints of your pony if you were to see them?" asked the rancher.

"I am quite certain that I would," answered Grace.

"Come and have a look at what Jim's found," he said, wheeling his pony and trotting back towards the place where the Overland animal hoof-print had been found by Jim.

"Yes," announced Grace after a careful exami-

nation of the tracks. "Those are Ginger's tracks, or else Ginger has a double; but what was my pony doing here? What does it mean, Sam?"

"I reckon it means that the feller who shot at me had your hoss. Hark!"

A scattering fire of revolver shots was heard from farther down the valley, and now Joe Bindloss's cowpunchers came riding from the ranch-house, they too having heard the shots.

"It's down by our camp!" cried Nora.

"Go to it, fellows!" shouted the rancher. "You folks go back to the ranch-house, I'm going to follow the boys," he announced, spurring his horse into a run.

Instead of following his direction the Overland Riders started at a brisk walk for their camp.

"Aren't we going back to finish our dance?" wailed Emma.

"Not until we find out what is going on down yonder," answered Tom Gray with a wave of the hand towards their camp.

"Oh, what a shame to spoil a perfectly lovely party?" wailed Emma. "Two-gun Pete surely could handle his feet even if they are big, and I was having such a nice talk with him about Freud, too."

"Emma Dean, if you keep on I shall be in favor of having your sanity inquired into," threatened J. Elfreda Briggs.

Stacy shook his head.

"You can't inquire into what ain't, can you?" he demanded.

"No, and that is the reason you have never been the subject of an inquiry," flung back Emma sharply.

At this juncture, Jim and Sam began to wrangle, each accusing the other of being to blame for the mess their party had gotten into, but the Overlanders were too much concerned with their own troubles to laugh at the argument of the guides.

A few moments later the Overland party came within sight of their camp. Someone, probably men of the "Circle O" ranch, had built up the campfire and could be seen moving about there.

As a matter of prudence, before leaving camp that evening, the Riders had hidden their rifles and ammunition, as they were in the habit of doing. Their revolvers they wore, for experience had taught them that it was the wise thing to do in a wild country, or in sections where there were ruffians such as they had encountered in the Coso Valley.

"Is everything all right?" called Hippy as they came up to the camp.

"No. Everything's all wrong," answered Bindloss savagely. "I'll kill somebody for this."

"What happened?" begged Grace.

"My night rangers discovered some fellows fooling about your camp, and knowin' you was at the ranch-house, because one of 'em had watched you to see what you were doing, he looked a little closer and saw the prowlers nosing into your property. That was Idaho Jones. Idaho fired three shots at the fellows, and that called our other rangers nearby, who rode in hot-foot, but the prowlers skipped before they got in, though not before Jones had taken a few pot shots at them. The thieves got away, but one of the fellows says Jones was certain that he hit one of them."

"Yes. But what about our ponies?" cried Grace.

"Not a hide nor hair of 'em left," answered Bindloss. "The critters took 'em all, and one had the nerve to ride yours, Mrs. Gray, almost over to the ranch-house. You better look around and see if they got anything else," suggested Bindloss amid a tense silence. "Jones and some of the others chased 'em into the hills and are after 'em now."

"The ponies stolen!" howled Stacy Brown.

"It's your fault, consarn ye!" raged Sam Conifer, addressing his companion. "I told ye to stay here an' watch things."

"It ain't! It's your fault. If you'd had any brains in yer empty head you'd stayed an' watched

this camp. You need somebody to watch you, an' that's no lie!" yelled Jim at the top of his voice.

The Overlanders burst out laughing, some of them a little hysterically.

## CHAPTER VI

### RUSTLERS ARE HARD PRESSED

"THE mules is still heah," cried Jim.

"Of course they aire, an' I'll bet my mule scared them fellers off. Thar ain't a man livin' that can git away with that cayuse of mine," declared Sam.

"Leastwise when he has mine to frighten them off," added Jim.

"I think you are right, James. Your mule would frighten the beasts of the jungles," said Emma.

"Missie, you're wrong. Jim's mule is the finest chunk o' mule flesh that you ever seen," declared Sam.

"You said it, old Whiskers. That critter of yours can't hold a firebrand to him," agreed Jim.

"He can't, eh? Wal, I'll show ye whether he can or not. Thar ain't a mule on four feet that can come up to mine," averred Sam heatedly.

"Will you kindly stop your wrangling and do something?" begged Tom Gray. "Hippy, are the rifles safe?"

"Yes. They didn't find them, thank goodness."

Grace and her companions, who had been making a hasty inventory of their belongings, announced that not a thing was missing.

"I reckon that our boys got here too soon and chased the critters away," boomed the rancher. "What do you folks think you're going to do now?"

"That is the question before the house," observed Stacy.

"Where would the horse thieves be likely to take the stock?" asked Grace.

"No one knows where their hang-out is, but I've heard that it's up in the canyon country, where it is said there are acres of rich grass and plenty of hiding places, but nobody ever succeeded in tracking 'em very far. They are too smart. The boys won't find 'em, but we'll wait till they get back."

"Where is the canyon country to which you refer, Mr. Bindloss?" asked Miss Briggs.

"On the other side of the valley in the mountains."

"Then is it not reasonable to suppose that they will attempt to cross the valley to-night so as to be in their lair by daylight?" persisted Elfreda.

"Sure they will," agreed Bindloss.

"Can you spare enough men to ride back and forth for a few miles on this side? It is possible that they might intercept the thieves and possibly recover at least one of our animals," suggested Miss Briggs.

"You're right. Miss, you have a head on your shoulders. Pete, you take all the boys that are left here and hit it along the valley, stringing out 'bout half a mile apart and watch like all possessed," directed Bindloss.

"We want to be in on that, Mr. Bindloss. How about ponies for Captain Gray and myself?" asked Hippy eagerly.

"You can have the one I'm riding, and Nevada will ride back to the ranch and get one for Captain Gray. Hustle, Nevada! The rest of you fellows go on, and don't be afraid to string out. Sam, I reckon you and Jim better stick around. No telling what might be pulled off by that gang. I've been thinking that mebby this is a sort of come-back for Sam's shooting that fellow in the wrist the other night. I'll bet it's the same gang, but there's something more to it. I don't know what, but I reckon on you folks finding out one of these days."

"You may be certain that we will," spoke up Emma. "And please, Mr. Bindloss, try to remember your dreams, for they may have a power-

ful bearing on this affair. Each of you do the same and tell them to me in the morning."

"It ain't dreams, it's lead that's goin' to settle this heah matter," observed Sam.

Nevada soon returned with a mustang for Tom Gray. The animal was not particularly good-natured, and gave Tom no little trouble at first, but fortunately he was not unhorsed, and the party was soon galloping away, each man carrying a rifle and fifty rounds of ammunition.

A few miles down the valley they were halted by Pete and told to spread out between him and the camp and keep a sharp lookout. Three rifle shots were to be fired as a signal that the thieves had been discovered. The men rode slowly back and forth, hailing as they met at the end of their beats, and thus the night wore on with nothing more disturbing than the howls of coyotes up in the mountains.

"Is it us that those fellows are howling at?" questioned Tom Gray as he met Two-gun Pete.

"I don't reckon so. The breeze ain't blowin' right fer them to scent us."

"Then it is probable that they are howling at someone up in the hills, isn't it?"

"Cap'n, I reckon as you aire right 'bout thet. Somethin' aire stirrin'. I feels it in my bones. Can you folks shoot?"

"Pretty well when we can see, but not in such darkness as this. Can you?"

"Shore I kin shoot in the dark, but thet ain't sayin' I can hit what I'm shootin at," chuckled Pete.

While the Overland men and cowboys were watching the foothills for the horse thieves, the girls of their party were busy making their camp comfortable and chatting with Joe Bindloss, who found himself much attracted to them. Then again, he felt it wise to remain with them until the men returned.

Jim-Sam were striding back and forth with "ears pricked up, jest huntin' fer trouble," as they listened to sounds of the night rather than to what those about them were saying. Both men finally sat down in the shadows on the mountain side of the camp, but not a word did either man have to say.

"May I sit down with you boys?" asked Emma, skipping over to them. "You are expecting something, I know, and I would just love to be in on it."

"Please, Missie, git back," urged Sam. "Mebby nothin'll happen. Most likely nothin' will, but we got to listen and watch, fer — Skip!" he added in a whisper.

Jim felt his companion stiffen ever so little, and Emma, observing the expression on his face,

without another word, turned and ran back to her companions. Sam had heard something, and Jim's nod indicated that he too heard it, but neither man moved from his position, though Sam Conifer's hand might have been seen caressing the big revolver butt that protruded from his holster.

Over yonder by the campfire there were chatter and joking and laughter, the old rancher being entertained as he had not been in many years, in fact not since he was a youngster in Illinois where he had been born and reared. Jim-Sam now heard nothing of the merriment, every faculty being bent on the slight rustling that both could hear in the bushes to the rear of them. It was not the breeze that was stirring the foliage, for there was no breeze, and they knew that it was either man or animal creeping up on them, though neither man could be certain that their own presence, there in the shadows, had been discovered.

Sam suddenly decided that the time for action was at hand. With one of those marvellously flashing movements that seemed so little a part of him, the old man jerked his weapon from its holster and fired back over his shoulder into the bushes without even looking around.

Nora uttered a scream, and the other girls sprang to their feet, while Joe Bindloss, uttering

a roar, charged towards the guides, both of whom, now having risen, were shooting into the bushes. Bindloss suddenly realized that the firing was not one-sided, for he heard bullets *zing* past his ears. The Overland girls also at once discovered that they were under fire — revolver fire — and springing away from the campfire, they threw themselves prone on the ground.

The rancher at this juncture took a hand in the shooting. The Overland girls, despite their fright, gazed at him in admiration. Bindloss, standing in the light of the campfire, was working his revolver, firing at the flashes he saw coming from the bushes. He made a splendid mark, but nothing touched him, though twice Jim-Sam heard grunts in the bushes, that told that someone there had been hit.

"I can't stand this!" cried Emma. "I'm going to get my rifle."

"Lie still!" commanded Grace. "Let the men do the fighting. If they need us we shall know it, and that will be time enough."

Emma sank back, complaining to herself. Stacy was nowhere in sight, but they knew that he was in hiding, for he had disappeared at the first shot fired by Sam Conifer.

The firing from the bushes ceased suddenly, the defense of the camp probably having grown too warm, as the Overlanders reasoned out the

situation. Now the three men fairly riddled the bushes with their shooting, sweeping the entire spread of foliage for several yards to the right and left of them.

A sharp cry from one of the girls drew the attention of Jim-Sam and Joe Bindloss to them.

"Horses!" shouted Grace.

The three men instantly divined her meaning. The attackers had taken to their mounts, and, with quick perception of what their defenders' next action would be, the Overland girls snatched up rifles and thrust them into the hands of the men as the latter ran for the open.

The heavy report of a rifle before the three men were clear of the camp, was the first intimation that Stacy Brown had come out of hiding. He was shooting at the retreating horsemen, now that it was reasonably safe for him to do so. A few seconds later Jim-Sam and Joe Bindloss were firing at the sound of retreating hoof-beats, and they kept on firing until the hoof-beats finally died away.

"Hark!" exclaimed Tom Gray as the sound of rifle fire from the Overland camp reached them.

"I heah it," answered Two-gun Pete. "Rifles! They aire at it fer keeps."

"Then let's go. Man, they need us!" urged Tom, his tone reflecting his excitement.

"Wait! Hold yer hosses fer a bit."

They heard the few answering scattering shots fired by the fleeing attackers; then the firing died out. Pete, with head cocked to one side, interpreted the sounds and the silence aright.

"Yer folks have got 'em on the run. Reckon we'll be goin'. Jest jog along so thet we don't run into somethin' headlong," he advised.

Tom Gray, worried and full of eagerness to get into action, had to put a firm check on himself to keep from racing on in the lead of his companion. Ahead of them somewhere they knew that Hippy Wingate was on the lookout for the horse thieves, and so long as nothing was heard from him there appeared to be no need for haste, but while Tom's every faculty was centered on what lay ahead of them, Two-gun Pete, like the mustang he was riding, gave as much attention to the rear as he did to what was ahead.

A flash suddenly leaped up in the darkness ahead, followed by a sharp report. Then guns banged with a speed that reminded Tom Gray of nights on the firing line in France.

"He's met 'em! Ride!" yelled Two-gun Pete, putting spurs to his horse.

Tom needed no urging, nor did his pony. The little animal uttered a whistling snort and plunged ahead, its nose at the flank of Pete's flying mustang.

"He's Met 'Em! Ride!"

"He's turned 'em!" flung back Pete. "They aire headin' 'cross the valley. That feller shore has got nerve."

No more was said, but both men swerved their mounts farther out into the valley to head off the fleeing horsemen, and drew up on them slowly. Pete saw that Hippy Wingate was fighting with all the odds against him, but that he was holding his own. Had there been light, the Overlander would have been in a much more serious situation.

As the two men neared the scene of the fighting, Tom Gray uttered a long-drawn yell, which Hippy heard, recognized, and answered. The attackers heard too, and put on a fresh burst of speed. Observing this, Pete jerked his rifle from its holster and emptied his magazine at them. Up to this time, however, Tom Gray had not fired.

"No use. We aire losin' ground," shouted Pete. "Ride till we git close enough to use the barkers. I never was no good at long-range shootin'."

A few moments later the horses of the ruffians became faintly discernible, and Pete rode straight at them. The ruffians were shooting as they raced, and Lieutenant Hippy Wingate was banging away at them and yelling like an Indian on the warpath. About this time Tom and Pete opened up with their revolvers. A pony went down and its rider was seen to plunge over its

head. Pete jerked his mustang aside just in time to avoid running into the fallen man and horse. There were fully half a dozen of the supposed horse thieves, some of whom were leading other animals behind them, and it was these to whom Pete devoted his attention, believing that the led horses were stolen animals.

The three pursuers were spread out in fan-shape now, Hippy Wingate on the extreme right, running in on the fleeing men head-on, then ducking and swinging out, after emptying his weapon at them.

"Hit!" he muttered as a sudden burning sensation was felt in the calf of his left leg. "Take that!" he yelled. Taking a desperate chance he rode right in among the scattered horsemen, hoping to cut them off and give his own companions an opportunity to do more effective work.

Hippy emptied two revolvers at the raiders, then all at once something suddenly seemed to snap in his head, and Hippy Wingate reeled in his saddle. Sudden and deeper darkness enveloped him, and Hippy fell forward on the neck of his mustang, both feet slipping from the stirrups. For a moment he clung there. He did not hear the scream of his pony as a bullet hit the plucky little animal, nor did he feel the impact when both he and the pony went down in the dust and lay motionless where they had fallen.

## CHAPTER VII

### A FIGHT TO A FINISH

"THEY are heading for the mountains!" shouted Tom as he and Two-gun Pete drew together.

"Yes, but we'll chase 'em into the foothills afore we quit," raged Pete. "Ain't hit, be ye?"

"No."

"Thet's good."

The two riders again settled down to their work, pushing their ponies to utmost speed. Then they observed that the ruffians were beginning to spread out, to scatter, a move that Two-gun Pete understood perfectly. They were planning to take to the mountains as individuals rather than as a body. This would make pursuit more difficult, in fact, practically impossible.

Both Tom and Pete had had many close calls from bullets, but neither gave much heed to them. They were too busy to consider something that had passed, and again, they had advantage in that they were pursuing while their adversaries were fleeing before them.

"Now give 'em the rifles!" yelled Pete as the pursued riders neared the foothills. "Keep shootin'!"

The pair unlimbered their rifles, and soon afterwards other cowpunchers who had joined them did the same. The heavy firing was plainly audible to the girls of the Overland party, who, fearing for their companions, were very nervous, and Joe Bindloss paced back and forth at the camp listening, his face stern, both hands tightly clenched.

"I hope they kill some of them devils! I hope they do!" he growled.

In the meantime Tom Gray and the cowpunchers were at it hammer and tongs, nor did they cease firing until the last of the supposed horse thieves were out of sight in the deep shadows in the foothills.

"I reckon thet's about all," observed Two-gun Pete dryly. "What I wants to know is whar thet fightin' friend of yours is."

"Can't we give Lieutenant Wingate a gun signal to come in?" asked Tom, a note of anxiety in his tone.

"No. Thet will be givin' notice to them critters thet we've finished this heah little game, an' I don't want them to have thet satisfaction. We'll mosey about a little an' see if we kin find Mr. Wingate."

Pete, followed by Tom, worked up and down the valley parallel with the mountain ranges for some little time without discovering Hippy; then all of a sudden, Pete uttered a *whoo — pe-e-e!* It was answered instantly, and two men rode cautiously out of the darkness. They proved to be Sierra Joe and Nevada, who said the others were somewhere to the north. A distant hail told the men that the others also had heard Pete's call and were heading in his direction. Tom, worried as he was about Hippy, could not but admire the efficient manner in which these men of the open worked. It was a revelation to him. Shortly after that the rest of the party rode in.

"Has any of you cayuses seen anythin' of the Old Man's friend?" questioned Pete.

"Is he the feller that was workin' to the south?" asked Nevada.

"Yes," spoke up Tom.

"Wal, he quit firin' some little piece back thar. I reckon mebby he got winged," announced Nevada.

"Line up, fellers! Take yer ranges by the hills on the other side of the valley and look sharp. I reckon mebby thar's some other things to find in this heah valley," added Pete significantly.

The search for Hippy began without a moment's delay, fast and efficient, but without a trace of excitement. The attitude of his com-

panions steadied Tom and assisted him to keep his head clear.

Two dead ponies were found first by Sierra, and near them lay two men, both dead. Sierra hailed his companions and when they arrived he struck a match to look at the victims.

"Chuck the light!" commanded Pete sternly.

The words were barely past his lips when a bullet *pinged* through the air over their heads.

"Ain't you got no sense, Sierra?" demanded Pete disgustedly. "Don't ye do thet agin. Them fellers aire waitin' fer us to give them a show, an' I reckon they'll hang out in the foothills fer some time yit. Anybody know these critters?"

Each cowboy took a look at the victims, but none recognized them. The brand on the dead mustangs also was unknown to them.

"Can't do nothin' till daylight. Hit the trail agin," ordered Pete, whereupon the search for Hippy Wingate was resumed. It was Tom Gray who found him, nearly a mile from their last stand.

"Help here!" shouted Tom.

Pete heard and understood. With the others, he spurred to the scene, finding Tom Gray on the ground bending over the stretched-out form of the fallen Overlander.

"Is he daid?" questioned Sierra anxiously.

"No. He is alive, but he must be badly hurt. He has been here for some time and is still unconscious. That looks bad. Boys, we must get him to camp as quickly as possible. How shall we do it?"

"I'll take him on my 'tang," answered Pete. "Wait till I git up; then boost him up to me and I'll do the rest. Nevada, you ride back a piece to make sure thet we ain't followed, an' give us a good start. You kin come on in then."

Hippy's limp form was lifted into Two-gun Pete's arms, and giving the pony the reins, Pete touched the animal with a light spur and the journey back to camp was begun. It was not a gentle ride for the wounded Overlander. In fact it was a killing ride, and when they came in sight of the campfire, the pony was white with lather.

It was at this juncture that Hippy began to mutter and struggle.

"Thet's all right, pard. Yer on yer way back to camp, and Pete's the boy thet's takin' ye; so jest rest easy-like. Cap, ride in an' tell 'em we aire comin'."

Tom spurred ahead, and by the time Pete and his burden rode in, the Overlanders were ready to receive them. All were pale, though Nora, who might have been expected to go to pieces, was calm, in fact fully as much so as Elfreda and

Grace who, as hospital workers in the great war, were used to scenes of this sort.

Hippy's face, as he was lifted from Two-gun Pete's arms, was seen to be covered with blood.

"Place him by the fire where we can see," directed Grace. "Stacy, fetch water, and be quick about it!"

"I'll get my kit and be back in a moment," announced Elfreda.

Blankets were spread out by the campfire, and on them the wounded Hippy was laid, and by the time Elfreda returned, Grace had sponged away the blood from his face and head.

"A bullet has laid his scalp open on the right side," she announced. "If there are no other wounds he will pull through all right. Do you hear me, Hippy?"

"Ye — es."

"Is this the only wound you have?"

"No. In leg," answered the patient weakly.

Nora pulled up the trousers from both limbs and discovered that the left one was bloody from half way below the knee down, and it was Nora's hands that washed the wound clean and prepared it for the dressing.

Elfreda Briggs, by this time, had returned with her first-aid kit, and was critically examining the scalp wound, Grace Harlowe standing over her with face full of interest and sympathy.

"This must be sewed up as soon as we have treated it," announced Miss Briggs, nodding up at her companion. "Hippy, I shall have to take several stitches in your scalp, and I am going to hurt you. You won't mind, will you, after all the fun you have been having to-night?"

"Get it over with," muttered Hippy.

"Grace, you might dress the leg while I am doing this embroidery work for Hippy. Did the bullet go all the way through the leg?"

"Ye — es," replied Nora. "I — I think so."

"It did, through the fleshy part. It is not a bad wound," volunteered Grace.

Miss Briggs began her work at once, and performed it quickly and skillfully. Hippy, despite himself, flinched under each needle thrust. A group of wondering, open-mouthed cowpunchers watched the Overland girl perform her operation, and by the time she had finished stitching the scalp together, Grace had completed her task on the leg wound.

"Oh! He's dead!" cried Nora, after a quick look into Hippy's now ghastly pale face.

"Don't get excited! He has fainted, that's all," comforted Miss Briggs, who thereupon proceeded to revive her patient. The pain had been a little more than Hippy, in his weakened condition, could bear, and under it he had swooned.

Old Joe Bindloss clutched off his sombrero and mopped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Wal! I've seen some things in my time, but I'll be shot for a hoss thief if I ever come up with the like of this," rumbled the rancher.

Hippy opened his eyes and a faint grin appeared on his face, whereat, the cowpunchers, as one man, heaved a deep breath of relief. They stood about awkwardly, sombreros tucked under their arms, not knowing what they ought to do, but quite positive to a man that they wished there were more patients to be treated so that they might stay where they were and watch these capable young women work for the rest of the night.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE "DUDE" MAKES GOOD

TWO-GUN PETE sidled over to Hippy. "Fer a dude, yer some scrapper. I'll say so. Shake, Pard," he said, extending a ham-like paw.

"Yep! Reg'lar bear-cat," agreed Sierra, and all the cowboys nodded solemnly.

"Thanks! Did we get any of them?" questioned Hippy, not much above a whisper, for every word sent shooting pains through his head.

"Two thet we knows of, and mebby some more. The Old Man's hoss thet you was ridin' got his'n, too."

"Oh, that is too bad. I'm sorry."

"Thet ain't nothin'," interjected Idaho. "What's a hoss when it comes to a scrap with a bunch of rustlers? They're mad now, and we'll mebby git another chance at 'em some day soon. Reckon you won't care 'bout mixin' in agin?"

"I reckon you have another guess coming, Idaho," answered Hippy, grinning.

Bindloss here interrupted by declaring that the

wounded Overlander must be taken to the ranch-house and put to bed. He said he would have a buckboard brought down and fetch him. Miss Briggs shook her head.

"I do not think best to have him moved to-night. If he feels better in the morning, you may do that," she said."

"All right. You're the doctor. I'll have the boys fix you up comfortable and stand guard for the rest of the night so you won't be bothered by those rustlers."

"Bindloss, I am sorry about the pony that got shot under me. Of course I shall pay you for him," offered Hippy.

"Pay nothing!" roared the rancher. "I owe you money for the walloping you folks give those coyotes. Here, you rough-necks! Fix these folks up with whatever they want, then spread out and ride 'round for the rest of the night, and if they get into any more trouble to-night, I'll fire the bunch of you and get riders who can see and shoot."

"I reckon we kin take care of our folks and do whatever is necessary," interjected Sam.

Bindloss agreed, but said his men would be on guard just the same. Shortly after that the cowboys mounted and rode out into the valley for their night's vigil.

A tent was erected over Hippy, and Nora

insisted on sitting up to look after him, but before turning in the Overlanders went into Hippy's tent with a cheerful word for their wounded companion.

"Hippy, tell me, did you dream anything when you were asleep out there after being shot?" whispered Emma.

"Yes. I dreamed that an imponderable quantity appeared suddenly out of the nowhere and gave me an awful wallop," retorted Hippy.

"I think you are real mean," pouted Emma. "Good-night! Don't forget to remember what you dream about to-night, for it may be of great importance to us."

"Huh!" muttered Hippy.

Soon after that the camp became quiet and every Overlander, except Nora, was sound asleep. Jim-Sam, however, were just outside holding a heated argument over the occurrences of the evening. Jim blamed Sam for shooting into the bushes and thus starting the row that ended in the wounding of one of their party.

"Why, you miserable galoot, you ain't got the sense of a flea!" retorted Sam. "If it hadn't been fer me, you'd been quarrelin' with the angels right this minute. Some folks ain't got brains enough to know nothin'."

"You said it," agreed Jim. "I've knowed that ever since I've been with ye."

The argument was continued at intervals all the rest of the night, and until at break of day they saw the cowpunchers ride off down the valley at a brisk gallop. Jim then built up the fire and began preparing for breakfast. The odors of the cooking soon awakened the Overlanders, and one by one they turned out rubbing the sleep out of their eyes.

Emma Dean's face, however, was glowing and her eyes were full of sparkle.

"Oh, girls," she cried. "I had the most wonderful dream last night. What do you think? It was a most adorable dream. I dreamed that I was engaged to the nicest man and —"

"What! Again?" shouted the Overlanders.

"Yes. Why not? He was a cowboy, and I dreamed that he had just shot a man who made eyes at me. Wasn't that a perfectly adorable thing for him to do?"

"Which man to do what?" questioned Stacy.

"For my fiancé to shoot the other fellow, of course. I just loved him for that."

"Emma, we will have you in a strait-jacket yet," retorted Grace laughingly. "How many does this one make?"

"Two real ones and a spiritual one. You know the one last night wasn't a real fiancé —"

"Just an imponderable quantity or quality," suggested Stacy Brown, which brought a laugh

from the Overlanders, and made Hippy grin despite the fact that it hurt him to twist his swollen face.

Hippy, while feeling much improved, was sore and weak, and when Joe Bindloss rode up, as the Overlanders were eating breakfast, he said he had arranged to have them move their camp up near the ranch-house, as it would be some time before Lieutenant Wingate would again be able to ride.

"He can stay at my house and I'll take all the care of him that he needs. You folks can make trips out and stay as long as you want to. What about it?"

The Overlanders agreed, and the rancher said the buckboard would be down later in the morning to fetch the wounded man. Bindloss sat down and ate breakfast with his new friends, and they had just finished the meal when Sam Conifer called to them that the cowboys were coming back, one of them leading an extra mustang.

Glasses were soon leveled at the approaching dust cloud which Sam had identified as belonging to the Circle O bunch. As the riders rode out of the cloud Grace uttered a cry of delight.

"It is Ginger! They have found Ginger! Oh, I'm so glad."

"Only Ginger! Fiddlesticks!" growled Stacy in disgust. "Somebody will have to buy me a

new pony. I'm not going to walk. You take my word for that."

"Ginger!" cried Grace as the punchers rode in, dust-covered, smiling, happy in being able to do something for one of the Overland girls.

The little pony trotted to her, showing every evidence of being glad to be back with his mistress, and Grace petted and fed the scrubby-looking mustang until Sam took the animal away and tethered him.

"We found him grazin' 'bout fifteen mile down the valley," explained Pete.

"What about the men who stole him?" demanded Bindloss.

"We didn't find 'em," said Pete. "Thar was three dead mustangs out thar, though, but saddles and bridles had been taken off, leavin' nothin' to identify the outfit by."

"See any blood?" questioned Sam Conifer.

"Wal, I reckon as thar was some," answered Pete, with a grin. "This is the bunch thet got yer mustangs, folks. No doubt 'bout thet. Boss, what do ye reckon on our doin' next?"

"Help these folks move up to the ranch-house."

"Thank you, but we can attend to that. We have our mules and one pony with which to operate," spoke up Tom Gray. "If you will arrange to get Lieutenant Wingate up, as you have suggested, we shall be all set."

Nevada was sent to the ranch to fetch the buckboard and returned with it in about an hour. In the meantime the cowpunchers were interested witnesses to the breaking of camp, in which all the Overlanders except Hippy participated, and in a short time packs were rolled and Jim-Sam were lashing them to the mules and to Ginger.

"I reckon these heah folks ain't no tenderfeet," observed Sierra, as the cowboys rode away.

"Have ye jest found thet out?" drawled Two-gun Pete. "If they kin all fit like the Dude kin, the rustlers better hike fer the mountains an' stay thar."

Nora, riding with Hippy, swung a hand to the men as the buckboard passed them on the way to the Circle O ranch, and by the time the rest of the party reached there Hippy was taking what ease he could get on a cot on the front porch of the ranch-house.

The Overland Riders pitched their camp on a little rise of ground a short distance to the rear of the ranch buildings, and the cowpunchers observed this further operation with interest.

"Good job," approved Idaho.

"Thank you," smiled Grace. "We hope you boys will come around whenever you can. You all have been mighty kind to us and we appreciate it."

"Where did you folks larn to do things like you do?" asked Nevada.

"Mostly from our western experiences. Of course we learned a few things in the war."

"The war? Was you thar?" laughed Sierra.

"Yes. I drove an ambulance. The other young women were in the service as hospital workers, and the like. My husband, Tom Gray, was a Captain of Engineers, and Lieutenant Wingate was a flier — a fighting pilot," Grace informed them.

"Gee whiz! Ain't thet the limit?" wondered Idaho.

"The next question is, what are we going to do for horses? Do any of you boys know where we can buy or rent some?"

"Mebby the Old Man might sell ye what ye need," suggested Sallie, who was in charge of the corral for Bindloss. "I'll arsk him."

Grace thanked him, but said Tom Gray would take the matter up with the rancher. Later in the morning Tom informed her that he had already done so, and that arrangements had been made to rent such ponies as they needed. Bindloss, he said, did not want to take money from them, but that the Overlander had insisted on his doing so. The arrangement, Tom said, was that they were to pay a rental of two dollars a week for each pony, and in the event of any of the

animals being lost or injured, the Overland Riders were to settle for the ponies at the rate of twenty-five dollars a head.

This was satisfactory to all hands, and on the following day they were to select their mounts.

That noon they took their luncheon with the rancher and his men in the bunk-house, by special invitation. After dinner Nora sang a song, Emma Dean recited a pathetic little selection to which she gave the title of " The Cowboy's Love," but which, instead of being about a cowboy, was the story of a child lost on the desert, and adopted by a mother wolf that had lost its own offspring.

The Overlanders were of the opinion that Emma made up the story, but at any rate it made a hit and moved some of the cowpunchers to tears, for cowpunchers, like sailors, are sentimental under their rough exteriors. Emma's eyes were twinkling mischievously when she finished and observed the effect of her story.

The cowmen wiped their eyes, then gave her a cowboy yell. Stacy Brown rose and bowed low in acknowledgment, which brought a loud guffaw. The dance that had been so rudely interrupted on a previous occasion was then resumed, and thirty minutes later the gathering broke up, every cowboy face wearing a broad grin. The Overlanders surely had brought sunshine to the Circle O ranch.

As all hands strolled out into the open, Emma walking at the side of Two-gun Pete, gazing up soulfully into his embarrassed face, Elfreda Briggs pointed to a cloud of dust far down the valley, a cloud that was rolling rapidly towards them.

"That looks like a young tornado," observed Stacy.

"I reckon thet's it, and on a hoss, too," said Idaho.

"On a horse?" wondered Emma.

"Yes. You'll see when it gits heah. Wait!" chuckled Idaho.

The Overland party now watched the cloud with new interest, and the cowboys laughed as they observed the puzzled expression on the faces of their guests.

"It is someone on a horse. You can't fool me," cried Emma.

"Yes, and it is a girl, too," added Elfreda.

The rider came on like an incipient whirlwind, her mustang on a run. She shot by the spectators and went on for some distance, then, circling out into the valley, came dashing up to them and flung herself from the saddle.

The newcomer gazed from one to another of the Overland Riders, while the cowpunchers chuckled to themselves. They knew the girl and looked for something interesting to follow. It did.

"I'm Judy! Who be you?" she demanded.

"We are the Overland Riders," answered Stacy Brown pompously.

Judy eyed the fat boy frowningly, then once more ran her gaze over the rest of the party.

"My gosh! You are a sweet bunch of dudes, ain't you? Here you, Idaho Jones, take my cayuse," she demanded, tossing the bridle-rein to the grinning cowboy.

Judy Hornby, in introducing herself to the newcomers in the Coso Valley, had done so in characteristic fashion.

## CHAPTER IX

### JUDY SPEAKS OUT

"HELLO, little gal!" cried Bindloss, coming forward with extended hand and smiling face.

"Hello! Why don't you introduce me to your friends?"

"Why, Judy, don't you know them?"

"No, but I'm goin' to in 'bout a minute," answered Judy, who shook hands and commented on each member of the Overland party as Joe Bindloss introduced her. "Some knock-down, ain't it?" grinned Judy after the introductions had been finished. "My Pap says you folks ain't no great scratch an' that you ain't here for no good. Pap says that Old Joe Bindloss better build a corral 'bout his cattle or he'll lose 'em with all these new folks roamin' 'round in the hills. Be you a fine lady, or ain't you?" demanded the mountain girl, fixing her eyes on Elfreda Briggs. J. Elfreda flushed under the scrutiny.

"No. I am just a plain, ordinary woman, a bachelor girl and —"

"In other words, an old maid, Miss Hornby," Emma Dean explained.

"Cut the 'Miss.' My name's Judy. What's your handle?"

"Emma."

"All right, Emma. Now the rest of you give me your handles, then we'll be down to cases," whereupon the Overlanders dutifully gave her their given names. "My gosh! What a lot of highfalutin' names. I should think they would keep you folks awake nights."

The Overlanders laughed heartily and Judy joined in the laugh, though with little idea what she was laughing at. The mountain girl had, in her lifetime, seen but few persons who did not belong to desert or mountain, and these bright-eyed girls were a revelation to her, because, as she expressed it, "most all that kind is stuck up."

If Judy was interested in her new acquaintances, they surely were even more attracted to her. She was a splendid type, her dark, handsome face unspoiled by the strenuous outdoor life she led, and her figure possessing lines that would have been the envy of any woman. Judy was only nineteen, so she said, but she looked more. That she could ride, the Overlanders had the evidence of their own eyes, and that she could shoot, was to be inferred from the business-like looking revolver that swung at her hip.

"Not all are 'stuck up,'" differed Grace laughingly. "We are not. If we were we probably should not be here, roughing it, when we might be at home taking our ease and getting fat."

"Judy, you mustn't take too seriously what Grace says. Remember, she and Nora are here with their husbands, both old married women, here because their husbands want to live part of the year in the open. That's the way women do when they love their husbands," volunteered Elfreda.

"A-huh! What are you doin' here, then?"

"Because I love the open and love my friends who also enjoy it."

"What's love?" flung back the mountain girl.

"Why — I — I — Perhaps you had better ask Emma. Old maids are not supposed to be authorities on that subject," answered Miss Briggs, her color rising.

"Love? Why, Judy, love is the most wonderful thing in the world," cried Emma dramatically, as Judy turned to her inquiringly. Emma's eyes were rolling and she registered extreme emotion, greatly to the amusement of her companions.

"My gosh! Ain't goin' to have a fit, be ye?" exclaimed Judy, whereat the Overland Riders shouted.

"Have you ever been in love?" interjected Nora.

"I don't know, Nora. Once I seen a fellow in a play in a tent over at Carrago, and he was some man, believe me. I jest sat there and looked at him and my heart got so wiggly that I couldn't do nothin' with it at all. But thet wan't nothin' to what happened later in the day when I met him on the street. He seen me lookin' at him an' smiled an' bobbed his hat to me. My gosh! I near fainted. I sure thought I was goin' to die right there. Never had no such feelin' in all my life."

"Yes?" urged the girls, doing their best to keep from laughing.

"Did you get acquainted with him?" asked Grace.

"No. I didn't dast. My Pap was with me, but I went home and cried. Can you beat it?"

"Oh, my dear, you *were* in love. You surely *were*," cried Emma.

"Was I?" wondered the mountain girl. "Was you ever that way, Emma?"

"Ever? Oh, help!" murmured Miss Briggs. "Judy, she is even making love to these fine cowboys. Doesn't that make you jealous?"

"Jealous? Of them rough-necks? Wal, I reckon not. I don't reckon on that kind of critter. I want a real man, I want to fly, to see what's on t'other side of them mountain ranges. I want to be a real lady an' know 'bout things. My gosh,

how I want to be like that! It's right in here!" cried Judy, clapping a hand over her heart. "I want to so much that it aches, it hurts like as if a rattler had given me a jab there. I tried poulticin' but it wan't no good. Pap said it was what I needed, but it wan't, and here I am. What do you reckon I ought to do?" finished Judy, passing a quick hand over her eyes.

The Overlanders did not laugh. There was a tragic note in the voice of the mountain girl that stirred their sympathies and moved them. Grace slipped an arm about her.

"Judy, I wish you might come with us while we are riding the ranges. Perhaps we might teach you things that would make you more contented with your life," said Grace, her voice full of sympathy. "Would you like to do that?"

"Like it? I'd be so dum tickled that I couldn't hold myself."

"Then why not come?" urged Nora.

"I don't dast. Pap would take it out of me right smart."

"You don't mean he would punish you — that he would lay hands on you?" begged Elfreda.

"Him wallop me? Wal, I reckon not! I ain't packin' no gun for nothin'."

"Judy!" cried Nora. "You mustn't say such things. Why not let us ask your father to let you go with us?"

"Ask *him?*" Judy shook her head with emphasis. "You folks keep away from Pap if you know what's good for you. Pap's got a grouch on most of the time, and he ain't particular 'bout who knows it. You keep away from Pap, 'cause he don't set much store by this here outfit. He reckons as you ain't got no business here, an' if you come foolin' round he'll chase you out. Would you go?" she demanded abruptly.

"It has been tried on us on other occasions, but up to the present time we have never gone until we were quite ready to do so," answered Miss Briggs.

"I wondered what you'd do, when I dreamed somethin' 'bout you last night—"

"Dreamed? Do you dream, Judy?" cried Emma, her face full of sudden interest.

"I reckon I do. I dreamed 'bout that actor feller for a month."

"Oh, isn't that adorable!" bubbled Emma. "The imponderable quality is working in you. Listen, dear. When you have another dream, you come straight to me and I'll make a psychoanalysis of it and tell you what it means."

"My gosh! If I could talk like that I'd be a real lady, wouldn't I? Where you goin' from here?"

"We don't know. All depends upon how my husband gets along with his wounds. He was

shot in a fight with the men who, we believe, stole our ponies, but we hope that he will be able to ride in a short time," answered Nora.

"Ain't that too bad? Gosh! If a fellow hurt my man I reckon I'd do some shootin' for myself," observed Judy. "Who do you think rustled them ponies?"

Tom Gray said they did not know, but that they proposed to find out, and asked her if she or her father had any suspicion as to who the rustlers were. Judy shook her head.

"I don't know nothin'. That's what I've been trying to tell you. Say, Emma, what's that word you got off jest now?"

"Imponderable," intoned Stacy gloomily.

"I didn't ask you, Mr. Fatty. Write it down, Emma, and I'll try it on Pap. I'll bet there'll be some fun. Wal, I reckon I'll be hittin' the trail for home. So long, Tom. Hippy, I hopes your laig gets better right smart," she called to the Overlander on the porch. "'Bye, girls."

"Come again soon, and as often as you can," urged Grace.

"Sure I will. Mebby I can't get back to-day, but I'll try. Say, Emma, I'm goin' to practice that word on Butte. That's my mustang. If he stands for it I reckon Pap can," finished Judy, starting slowly towards her pony, arms linked with Grace and Elfreda. "Butte's got a temper

somethin' like Pap's. I reckon he got it from Pap, too. Let's see. What's that word? Im—impond'ble. All right. Jest watch me."

Judy swung lightly into her saddle.

"G'wan, you impond'ble, dad-busted cayuse," she shouted, touching the animal lightly with a spur.

Butte responded instantly. Uttering a grunt, both hind heels went into the air before Judy had succeeded in getting her feet into the stirrups.

The mountain girl made a quick reach for the swinging stirrups and missed, whereupon the mustang leaped clear of the ground, coming down stiffly on all four feet, head down with hind quarters shooting into the air. Judy was catapulted over his head and landed on her back with a whack that should have knocked all the breath out of her.

Tom Gray made a quick spring for the pony's head and grabbed the bridle. The pony fought him, but a firm grip on the animal's nose shut off his breathing and subdued him in a moment.

The girls ran to Judy just as she sat up. Judy was a little dazed, but she grinned.

"Oh, you poor girl! You're hurt," cried Nora.

"Mebby I be, but I reckon the ground is hurt worse. Anyhow what happened to me an' the ground ain't a flea-bite to what's goin' to happen to Butte afore we gets home. Say, Emma! I

don't reckon as I'll say that word to Pap all of a sudden. I'm too dad-busted sore now to have another fight on my hands to-night, and I'll be sorer by the time I gets home. I'm goin' to ride him this time."

Judy again flung herself into the saddle, and this time both feet caught the stirrups. The mustang instantly threw himself into another buck. The spur dug into him harder and harder and Judy's whip came down on his flank again and again. A leap carried them clear of the Overland party, and for the next few moments they were treated to the most spirited exhibition of horsemanship that they had ever seen. Old Bindloss was shaking with laughter, and the cowpunchers were howling with delight and firing their six-shooters into the air.

"She's got him!" cried Emma. "Oh, I wish I could ride like that. There she comes!"

Judy, who was by now a full quarter of a mile out in the valley, had whirled and was driving straight at them. On she came, the pony's efforts to unseat its rider growing less and less, as its speed increased.

"Whoo — pe-e-e-e!" yelled Judy in her shrill, high-pitched voice as she reached the Overlanders, and turning, tore off down the valley where she was soon lost to sight in a cloud of dust.

## CHAPTER X

### THE ROUND-UP

JUDY HORNBY did not return to the Circle O ranch that day nor the next, and when she did she was not nearly so talkative as before. The girl, however, listened eagerly to all that her new-found friends had to say to her, and what they said was intended to be helpful to this unusual young woman who had known little companionship of her own sex.

After a time her tongue loosened a little and she told them that "Pap" had forbidden her to visit them unless he told her to go. Judy declared that she didn't give a rap whether he liked it or not, and that she was going to ride over to the Circle O ranch whenever she felt like it.

"He don't dast do nothing to me anyway. I reckon it's because I tried that 'impond'able' thing on him. When he asked me where I got it an' I told him over here, you ought to seen him git mad. Pap sure was a scream. Lemme look at your hair," she added abruptly, addressing Miss Briggs, who nodded good-naturedly.

"Gosh! Ain't that fine? But for the love of Mike, how do you do it?"

"I will do yours if you wish," offered Elfreda.

"Would you?"

"Of course," answered J. Elfreda. "Sit down and I will see what I can do with it. You have beautiful hair, and I am not eager to see you wear it any other way than you do now — down your back."

Greatly to the amusement of her companions, Miss Briggs performed an elaborate piece of hairdressing, building up a wonderful tower of shining brown on the mountain girl's head. Then a mirror was brought and Judy was permitted to look at the result, the Overlanders awaiting the verdict in silent expectancy.

Judy gazed into the mirror for some moments before looking up.

"Gosh-a'mighty, I'm a lady now for sure, ain't I?" she breathed, heaving a deep sigh.

After a time the Overland girls sought to explain to her that it was not the dress she wore nor the way she wore her hair, but her breeding, that made the lady. Judy listened attentively to the brief lecture read to her by Grace and Elfreda, then started for home, this time at a slow jog. Judy was in a thoughtful mood.

For the next week she was a daily visitor at the Circle O ranch. Hippy Wingate was again on his

feet, but still wearing a bandage on his head and walking with a cane. His companions were in no haste to leave him; in fact they had been waiting for his recovery quite willingly because they had been urged by Bindloss to stay for the round-up that was now close at hand, when the cattle would be rounded up into herds and the fat ones cut out, branded again and driven to a shipping point for market. Bindloss promised his guests a lively time. The cowpunchers, too, were looking forward to the occasion with more than their ordinary interest, for in it they saw an opportunity to show their horsemanship and skill to the Overland girls.

Judy Hornby was invited to accompany the party to the round-up, but for some reason she refused, and went away that day with her face dark and resentful. The Overlanders were at a loss to account for the sudden change in her.

The day of the big round-up arrived, and the ranch presented a scene of activity long before daylight that morning. There was much equipment to be shipped down the valley, for the first herd to be rounded up were grazing more than twenty miles away, not very far from Judy's log-cabin home, where her father had quite a herd of cattle of his own, though small compared with the Bindloss herds. His brand was the " Double Q " while Bindloss's was the " Circle O."

Lieutenant Wingate, not feeling able to take the long ride, decided to remain at the ranch-house until one of the herds near by was rounded up. He could watch the round-up, then easily get back to the ranch-house should he find it necessary to do so. There being no reason for Jim-Sam's remaining at the ranch, Bindloss accepted their offer to assist in the round-up.

"I am going to help, too," promised Emma, as they were eating breakfast in camp next morning with Bindloss as their guest.

"No, you ain't," replied the rancher. "You keep out of it and stay where you're safe. There's some wild ones in the bunch we are going after to-day."

Tom Gray was accepted as a novice, and a pony that knew the ropes was assigned to him for the work. Bindloss told him that so long as he gave the animal its head he would be reasonably safe.

The Overlanders got a later start than the others, but managed to get away shortly after daybreak. It was a wonderful ride through the fragrant morning air, one that every member of the party thoroughly enjoyed. Hippy in the meantime was having a glorious morning, too — snoring in the ranch-house, where he proposed to remain all day and have "peace and quiet," as he expressed it.

As they neared the scene of the round-up, near mid-forenoon, the Overlanders rode up the first bluff of the foothills, as they had been directed to do, and then followed along parallel with the valley. As they drew near they suddenly found themselves gazing down upon the scene that they had come so far to see — a western round-up.

A great herd — thousands of them, it seemed — were milling about on the plain below them, making the dust fly in suffocating clouds, while wilder ones of the herd were galloping for the foothills. Calves were running about bawling for their mothers, and frantic cows were splitting the herd in search of them. Above the din rose shrill and clear the calls of the cowpunchers, calls that were familiar, especially to the steers, who seemed to know the meaning of them even if they did do exactly the opposite to what was expected of them.

Up and down the rolling foothills raced the long-horns, with ponies ridden by yelling, shouting, dare-devil riders, in pursuit. Here and there a lasso wriggled through the air, spun by an irate cowboy, and a big steer went down on his nose.

A bunch of wild steers raced past the Overlanders, and Stacy, suddenly deciding that it was his duty to drive them back, galloped after them.

The fat boy soon found himself in the midst of a charging, bellowing mass of wild steers whose

long horns and threatening jabs at his mustang, made him wish that he had kept out of it. He was in a more perilous position than he realized. The girls were shouting for him to come back, but in the uproar Stacy did not hear them, nor could he have obeyed had he heard.

Two-gun Pete was the first to discover the boy's predicament. He came flashing up the grade, past the girls, but without looking at them, and rode on until he had reached the herd. There he began uttering shrill yells that were heard above the uproar. Pete, at the risk of his pony's life, if not his own, dodged in and out until he got to the side of the fat boy.

"Hot-foot it out of this, you tenderfoot!" he roared.

"All right. Show me the way, you cow-puncher!" flung back Stacy.

"Follow me, but not too close." Pete, exerting mighty efforts, soon split the herd apart, and into the opening thus made, Stacy rode without further urging, and in a few moments he was clear of the herd. "Now git back with ye and stay back!"

Now that he was up there, Pete decided to head off the wild bunch. He rode his sweating mustang until it seemed as if he would ride the little animal off its feet, and little by little he bunched the unruly steers and started them towards the

valley, when they suddenly headed straight for the position occupied by the Overlanders.

"They'll run us down!" cried Nora.

"No! We can get away if they get too close. Ride for them and yell like all possessed. Try to turn them to their left," urged Grace.

The Overland girls, fired with the same spirit that was urging the cowpunchers in their work, started forward at a gallop, waving their sombreros and uttering such screeches as probably not only astounded, but frightened the outlaw steers. The cattle, however, held to their course just the same. Two-gun Pete saw and understood what the girls were trying to do. He also understood full well the risk they were taking. Pete pealed out a shrill, far-reaching warning, but they did not hear.

"Yell, you Overlanders!" screamed Elfreda Briggs, and, taking her own advice, she uttered yell after yell, that Two-gun Pete later declared on his honor as a cowpuncher frightened one tough old maverick to death. At least the animal was found dead at about that point, later on in the day.

J. Elfreda evidently turned the tide, for a leader swerved, and the herd followed him and went plunging down the slope.

"Hot stuff, but don't ye do it again!" shouted the cowboy as he followed the herd down the

foothill and out into the valley, where other cowpunchers came to his assistance and rounded it up.

The girls, now that the excitement was ended, suddenly felt weak in the knees. They realized that they had taken a desperate chance, and that they had not been unhorsed, and perhaps gored to death, was due to great good luck, and to the far-reaching power of the dignified Elfreda Briggs' voice, rather than to any skill on their part.

"That was a fool thing to do," observed Stacy, who now came trotting up to them.

"Why, you unappreciative creature!" rebuked Emma. "Don't you know that we were trying to save your life?"

"Save nothing!" growled Stacy.

"Thank you," bowed Emma. "I could not have said it better myself," whereupon the other girls laughed merrily, and Stacy drew off by himself where he sat sullenly observing the work going on below him.

All day the milling about, the cutting-out, the yells and the bellows, with here and there a sharp encounter between cowboy and an ugly steer, continued without a let-up. No one thought of eating. There was too much work to be done, and even the Overlanders forgot their noon luncheon which they had brought with them.

At twilight the cowmen were still busy, but by this time they had several hundred animals

in the big corral, and in another a bunch of stock for branding, while out on the range as many more animals were stirring about restlessly. Campfires began to spring up here and there, over which tired riders cooked their slender suppers and rested before taking up the work of the night. This work included branding and keeping rounded-up the stock left out on the range. Bindloss joined the Overlanders at their coffee and bacon. He was covered with dust and his voice was hoarse from yelling at cattle and at his riders.

"How long is this thing going to continue?" questioned Stacy Brown.

"All night, young feller. Of course things will quiet down 'long 'bout midnight. We've got to get some rest, you know."

Grace said she thought that they should be starting back towards camp after supper, but Bindloss shook his head.

"Some of the men will be going in later in the evening. I'd rather have you folks wait and ride in with them," he said, but without giving any reason for the request. "You can ride 'bout after supper, but keep away from milling bunches, and see the sights. You'll be interested in the branding, if you've never seen it done."

Soon after supper the girls of the party, accompanied by Stacy, rode down the valley. There

they scattered somewhat, Emma first having discovered Two-gun Pete and stopping to talk with him. Stacy rode on, saying that he wished to see the rest of the show.

Pete told Emma that he did not like the way the cattle had been acting that day. He averred that something had been stirring them up of late, but reckoned it must be a mountain lion that had been trying to get the calves. Whether or not the beast had succeeded he said he did not know, for no one knew how many calves there were in any of the herds.

Two-gun Pete had work to do, so Emma rode on and joined her companions whom she found chatting with the owner of the ranch, who sat his pony surveying the activity that was everywhere. They wondered how he could make anything out of all the confusion in the darkness, which the many little fires merely accentuated. Joe Bindloss, however, knew exactly what was going on at all points of the round-up.

Idaho Jones interrupted the conversation when he came galloping up to the party.

"Hey, Boss!" he called. "I been lookin' all over fer ye." The voice of the cowpuncher held an urgent note that each member of the party before him felt.

"Eh? What's wrong?" demanded Bindloss sharply.

"Pop Skinner jest rode in, an' he's lookin' fer ye hot-foot. He says as he reckons thar's trouble up in the valley."

"What about?"

"He didn't wait to tell me."

"Find him — find him and fetch him here almighty quick! Hump yourself!" commanded Bindloss.

"Co—o-o-o-o! Pop, heah," yelled Idaho, his quick eye discovering the man for whom he was looking, and out of the darkness shot a gray mustang bearing down on them. "Thar he is now."

"What's wrong?" shouted Bindloss.

"I don't reckon as I know, Boss, but as I was comin' down to jine the outfit heah, I runned across Sallie guardin' the number six herd. He said as he'd seen a bunch of riders come out of the foothills, 'bout four mile above heah an' head off in the direction of the ranch an' he thought ye better know 'bout it. As I was comin' down anyway, I made a hustle. 'Bout half way down I heard rifle shots up-valley. Thet's all I knows 'bout it, but I reckoned you ought to know."

"Get Pete and all the other fellers you can skin in a hurry and light out for the ranch. There's trouble, and I've felt it somehow all day!"

While Bindloss was giving his orders another cowpuncher rode in on a pony that was dripping

lather. He, too, was from somewhere up the Coso Valley and he was excited.

"They've attacked the ranch, Boss!" he fairly flung at Bindloss.

"Who's attacked it?" roared the rancher.

"Don't know nothin' 'bout thet, but I seen an' heard the firin' and thar's the old Harry to pay up thar."

Idaho had already ridden away to gather a bunch of his fellows for the ride back to the ranch, and while this was being done Bindloss eagerly questioned the two men who had brought him evil tidings. Perhaps Bindloss had an idea as to who the men from the mountain were, but if so he did not inform the disturbed Overlanders. They were thinking of Hippy up there alone in the ranch-house, himself suffering from wounds and perhaps helpless in the hands of a band of mountain ruffians.

"We must go!" cried Nora.

"Yes, we will go," answered Grace. "I wish I could find Tom."

"They'll get him," answered Bindloss. "You'll have to ride some if you keep up with the cowpunchers, and this ain't no pleasure trip neither. Here they come!"

Pete was leading the party of rough-riders that came racing towards him, and with them was Tom Gray. His companions of the Overland party

hardly recognized him, for his clothes were covered with dust and his face was streaked where the perspiration had trickled through the grime.

"Orders, Boss?" called Pete.

"Ride! Ride the cayuses to death, but get there, that's all. Go!"

The cowboys pulled their mustangs and fairly lifted them, rearing and wheeling, and were off like projectiles, fierce fires burning in every cowboy heart, and the lust for battle and revenge taking full possession of them.

The Overland Riders were not many seconds behind them in starting, nor did they have to urge their mustangs, who were as eager as they to keep up with the reckless riders ahead, riders that were using spur and voice in the wild night ride up the Coso Valley.

## CHAPTER XI

### HIPPY DEFENDS THE RANCH

LIEUTENANT WINGATE after a refreshing afternoon's sleep had remained up long enough to brew tea and fry bacon and eggs for himself. It was dusk when he finished his supper.

"I ought to wash the dishes, I suppose, but I think I'll let the girls do that. There is some satisfaction in being a convalescent," he decided, grinning at his own humor. "Queer thing about convalescence — when you get through with your sleep you are ready for another. Ho, hum!"

Hippy, with the aid of a cane, hobbled out to the porch that fronted the valley and sat down on his cot, then lay back breathing in the soft breezes from mountain and plain.

"This is the life," he muttered, sinking into a half doze.

All at once the Overland Rider pulled himself into keen wakefulness. He was positive that he heard horses approaching, but they seemed to be a long way off. His first thought was that either

the Overlanders or some of the cowboys were on their way home, but with the caution born of experience, he decided to lie quietly and wait.

The hoof-beats ceased, so far as he was able to hear, and silence settled over the valley, broken now and then by the howl of a hungry coyote. Somehow this sudden silence got on the nerves of Lieutenant Hippy Wingate, and getting up he hobbled into the ranch-house and strapped on his revolver holster. Bethinking himself of Bindloss's rifle he got that, examined the chambers and, as he expected, found it fully loaded.

"Now we are all set," he muttered. He had reached the ranch-house door when he halted sharply and gazed into the night over which the stars shed a faint light, making objects within the range of his vision stand out in unreal and fantastic shapes. Hippy, however, did see something moving, something that was quite real. This something was a man, and as he gazed other figures were discovered.

"I wonder if that's some of the boys?" he muttered. Upon second thought he decided that the cowpunchers would not be moving about so quietly. Three appeared to have come from the direction of the Overland camp at the rear of the ranch-house, and Hippy then knew that all was not well at the Circle O ranch. He stepped back, softly closed and bolted the door, and took his

place at a window that had been pulled down from the top. From that vantage point he watched with straining eyes.

The men appeared to be investigating, undoubtedly for the purpose of learning whether or not there were anyone about the place. One finally turned his attention to the ranch-house, first cautiously trying the door, then peering in through the window. Hippy had stepped aside as the man approached him, and a few seconds later he saw a face pressed against the pane.

After a moment of peering, the fellow carefully raised both windows from the bottom and thrust his head in.

Hippy pressed his body against the wall and grasped his revolver by the barrel. The fellow's shoulders were thrust in and the watcher saw that he was about to climb in.

Lieutenant Hippy Wingate took instant advantage of the opportunity and brought the butt of his revolver down with full force on the intruder's head. The whack was so loud that the Overlander thought the others must hear, and, without an instant's hesitation, he grabbed and dragged the unconscious man into the room.

"I hope I haven't killed the ruffian!" A hand placed over the man's heart told Hippy that he had not. Hippy, knowing that there was a lasso hanging in Bindloss's room, in fact that there

were several there, hobbled in, and fetching the rope, hog-tied the man, after which he put a handkerchief gag in the fellow's mouth.

"Good! This is like taking candy from babies," he chuckled, going over to the window and replacing it as it was before. This enabled him to stand up and look out, and also gave him free range in case he found it necessary to use his weapons. Bethinking himself of other windows, Hippy made a circuit of the lower floor and closed and locked them. For a man to get in now would necessitate breaking a window, which he surely would hear.

The watcher had no more than returned to his open window than he suddenly ducked to one side, for he discovered that a second man was about to peer in. Unlike the first caller this man walked away and went around to the rear of the house, but he was back in a few moments, this time accompanied by a companion. They were whispering, and at this instant the man on the floor gave a kick with his heel that stopped the whispering instantly.

Lieutenant Wingate went over to the bound man.

"Do that again and I'll settle you!" he hissed with all the savageness that he could put into his tone. "I mean what I say!"

Returning to the window he stood to one side

watching the two men who were again holding a whispered conversation, pausing now and then to listen attentively. After a few moments of this, one raised the window an inch or so at a time and looked in. In the darkness they saw nothing.

"I reckon it's all right. I'll go in an' ye foller me," said one in a low, guarded tone of voice, whereupon he began crawling in. As he landed on his hands on the floor, Lieutenant Wingate hit him a terrific wallop on the head with the butt of his revolver, then made a swift pass with it at the head of the other man whose head was just inside the window.

It hit the fellow a glancing blow, and jerking his head from the window he fell over backwards, then staggering to his feet he ran, uttering a warning cry.

The time for secrecy, so far as Lieutenant Hippy Wingate was concerned, had passed. He sent a bullet from his revolver after the man and then discovering other prowlers trying to get into the corral, he snatched up the rifle, and fired at the ground just behind them.

The prowlers scattered in record time and a volley of shots pinged into the ranch-house in reply.

The Overland Rider now hastily turned his attention to his second victim, and in a few minutes he had the man bound and dragged to

the other side of the room at a distance from the first prisoner.

"Confound the ruffians! Why couldn't they have come singly?" he growled. "I could have caught the whole bunch. I reckon maybe there will be something doing in a few moments."

There was. A rifle crashed out, then another, and a snapping fire was directed at the Circle O ranch-house, with Hippy lying flat on the floor waiting for the shooting to stop. It soon did, whereupon the Overlander crept to the window and peered out. Not a human being was in sight, but the watcher was too old a hand at campaigning to believe that the prowlers had gone away. He reasoned, too, that by making no return of their fire, they might believe that they had hit him. As he had surmised would be the case, a man appeared after a time just beyond the corral. The fellow darted across and disappeared behind the stable where saddles and other equipment were stored.

The man's next appearance was a few moments later when he walked to the corral, looked in and strolled back to the protection of the stable. Others then appeared, at first exercising the utmost caution, but little by little showing that they believed danger to them had passed.

Hippy Wingate chuckled. His ruse had succeeded, but he knew the end was not yet. At

the same time he was groping for the reason for the presence of these prowlers. From their actions he believed that they were trying to steal the ponies, and a moment later he saw them again at work trying to break the locked gate of the corral. They were battering away at it so boldly that he knew they now feared no interruption.

" I've got to take a chance," muttered the Overland Rider, " but I'll shoot low. Perhaps I won't hit any of the stock."

There was no time to lose, for in a few moments those sledge-hammer blows, that were probably delivered with a maul or an axe, must produce results.

Taking as careful aim as he could in the uncertain light, he pulled the trigger and Old Joe Bindloss's rifle roared.

A yell greeted the shot, by which sign Lieutenant Wingate knew that the bullet had found a mark. He fired again, but this time there was no answering yell. Two men grabbed up one of their number, the party started on a run for the stable and Hippy deliberately fired right into the group. One man staggered and fell. He was quickly dragged away, but not before the Overland Rider had emptied his rifle at them, though, so far as he was able to discover, without results. Accurate shooting was impossible under the conditions.

The rancher's rifle was now empty, nor did Lieutenant Wingate know where to find more ammunition. He possessed his revolver and a belt of cartridges which would keep him going for some time, provided he were conservative in their use, so the rifle was laid aside and the revolver took its place. A quick examination of the two captives informed him that both were conscious.

"You fellows! Don't you make a sound or I'll use the business end of my gun on you," he warned.

Rifle bullets at this juncture again began ripping through the side of the house, and while they were still crunching about the room with a chilling sound the Overlander, who was on the floor, heard a powerful blow delivered on the door. It was followed by other blows. The ruffians were trying to beat the door down, and already a panel had been shattered.

Hippy hopped to his feet and placed himself before the door, feeling reasonably safe there so long as men were standing in front of it.

Thrusting the muzzle of his weapon close to the shattered panel he pulled the trigger, and a howl of rage answered it. This shot had not missed.

Before giving the attackers a chance to do further damage Hippy fired the remaining chambers of his revolver through the door in quick

succession. He did not know whether or not he had made a hit, but he knew that, for the moment, he had effectively checked operations out there.

A few seconds were lost in reloading, during which not a sound reached him from the outside. Stooping over, he peered through the shattered panel. As he did so there came a sudden burst of rifle fire and a dozen bullets ripped through the door.

Lieutenant Wingate straightened up, staggered, clapped a hand to his head, half turned and crashed full length to the floor. As he lay there, bullets continued to thud through the door and the siding of the ranch-house, then ceased as suddenly as they had begun, but Hippy, some moments since, had ceased to hear or know.

## CHAPTER XII

### AT THE LAST MOMENT

"SMOKE him out!" came the sharp command after the firing had died down. "That'll fetch the critter. Then git him."

Some dead grass, a handful of chips and a match did the work, and a flickering blaze was soon started under one corner of the ranch-house.

"Now the hosses!" commanded the same voice. "Two of ye git behind the house to watch for him, the others go fer the mustangs in the corral."

The men ran to obey the orders of their leader, when a sudden shout from one of them changed the plans of the attackers entirely. It was a shout of warning. Following it the ruffians plainly heard the sound of hoof-beats approaching — many of them. They were coming at what the trained ears of the mountain ruffians told them was a killing pace.

"Hit the trail!" yelled the leader. "Go south and scatter! Hit it hard!" came the further orders.

The ruffians were in their saddles within a minute thereafter, some of them carrying wounded companions who had got in the way of Hippy Wingate's bullets, and they were around the corner of the corral in a twinkling. Once in the shadow of it they faded away into the night, just as Two-gun Pete and his companions flashed in with guns ready for instant use.

"Quick! Fire!" shouted Idaho.

"Git water!" yelled Two-gun Pete, leaping from his mustang.

Old Joe Bindloss came up as the cowpunchers were dashing water on the flames that were now licking at the side of the building. He instantly threw himself from his pony and grabbing a pail began carrying water and giving orders at the same time. The blaze was extinguished in a few minutes. The Overland Riders came up at this juncture.

"Gosh a-mighty, what's been going on here?" bellowed the rancher. "Look at that door! Clean busted in."

The boys quickly brought lanterns from the stable, and by their light discovered the bullet holes in door and siding. Windows, too, were shot out at the front of the house.

"Thar's been a fight heah!" decided Pete.

"Hippy!" wailed Nora, almost collapsing as her pony stopped.

"We'll find out about thet, Missie," answered Pete. "Hey, Dude! Be you thar?" he shouted.

There was no reply, and the Overlanders ran for the house, each one fearing the worst.

"Back! I reckon I'll go in first!" bellowed Bindloss. "It's my house, and I reckon it's up to me to go in ahead. Boys, get behind me with the lights so they don't get in my eyes. You Overlanders keep out of range in case there should be some scrapping. No telling what we might meet in there." Bindloss with drawn weapon, Two-gun Pete at his side, strode up and kicked in the remnants of the front door of his home. As the door went down both men leaped lightly to one side, fearing an ambush.

A dead silence followed.

"Lights here!" commanded Bindloss, stepping in with revolver thrust before him.

Nothing happening, cowpunchers and Overlanders crowded in. They found the old rancher standing with a dazed expression on his face.

"Gosh a-mighty!" he muttered over and over. "What's happened?"

It was then that the Overlanders discovered the two bound men, and then Hippy at some little distance from them, stretched out on his face, one hand still grasping his revolver.

"Hippy!" It was a wailing cry from Nora as she threw herself down beside him. "He's dead!

He's dead! They've killed him!" Nora threw both arms about her husband and tried to turn him over, but he was a dead weight and she failed.

Tom did it for her, the cowpunchers during all this time standing with gaping mouths as dazed as was their employer.

Grace and Elfreda were at Hippy's side in an instant, and it was Elfreda who discovered that he was not dead.

"Light here, please," requested Miss Briggs in a tone so calm that it steadied the others of the party. "Look at this, will you?" she added. "A bullet has ripped the bandage from his head, and torn open the stitches that I put in Hippy's scalp."

"Wounded in exactly the same place!" murmured Grace. "How strange!"

"What 'bout these cayuses, Boss?" demanded Two-gun Pete, fixing a malignant gaze on the two helpless ruffians who were looking from one to the other of the party with anxiety in their eyes. "Shall I make a good job of it an' sarve 'em the same way somebody has sarved the Dude?"

"Shut up! They'll keep. This man gets first attention. Is he bad off, Miss?" questioned Bindloss.

"I can't say," answered Elfreda. "If I knew

how long he has been in this condition I might make a better guess."

Pete released the gun from Hippy's hand, felt of the barrel, smelled of the muzzle, then looked into the cylinder to see how many shots had been fired from it.

"Ain't been this way more'n ten or fifteen minutes, I reckon. Gun's warm yit."

"Then it may be only concussion of the brain, but I shan't be able to tell definitely for some little time. Some one run to camp and get bandages. Tom, will you please go? Fetch my case along."

Elfreda called for water and by the time Tom returned had bathed the wound, the same wound reopened, though the scalp on either side of it was lacerated somewhat more than before. Restoratives were administered by Grace, while Elfreda was dressing and re-sewing the wound, she believing it best to do this before the patient recovered consciousness. Grace was not so successful, and at Bindloss's orders the cowpunchers picked up the wounded Overlander and carried him to his bed at the back of the house.

"Take the gags out of them fellers' mouths. I reckon they'll have something to say," drawled Bindloss in the cool tone that his men knew from experience was a mask for a raging passion beneath it.

The gags were none too gently removed, the captives' weapons were jerked from their belts, smelled of and examined and found not to have been fired that evening. This was evidenced by the fact that the cylinders were fully loaded, that the barrels were cold, and that there was no odor of burnt powder to be detected at the muzzles.

"Stand 'em up against the wall and let's have a look at 'em!" commanded the rancher, and after this had been done, and one of the cowboys had held a lantern up to their faces, Bindloss squinted at them frowningly. "Any of you fellows know these critters?"

Each cowpuncher stepped up and took a long, stern look at the faces and shook his head.

"I reckon you two bit off more'n you could chew, eh? Who are ye?" demanded Bindloss.

The captives, now sullen-faced, made no reply.

"What happened that you two are hog-tied in my house?"

"Ain't no use fer to ask questions 'cause you ain't goin' to git no answers," growled one.

"I'll tell ye what happened," spoke up the other captive. "We was ridin' by, an' knowin' thet you-all was down the range, seen somethin' was goin' on in heah an' we jest come up to look in, an' got a crack on the haid. Thet's all."

"You're a liar!" blazed Joe Bindloss, drawing back a clenched fist as if to strike the man, but

the fist slowly relaxed and his face grew calm again. "You'll talk before I git done with you, I promise you that. When the man in there wakes up, if he ever does, I'll hear the truth. If he dies I'll shoot every man in these ranges if I have to do so to git the right ones, and I'll begin with you, you sneaking coyotes! Take 'em out and tie 'em in the barn. And, boys, fix 'em so they can't get away. If there's any rough stuff to be pulled off, I'll do the pulling. Understand?"

The cowpunchers nodded and picked up the prisoners. When outside the door the man at the head of each prisoner dropped his burden and the cowboy at the foot dragged his captive by the feet all the way to the stable. Sam Conifer followed and stood gazing at the prisoners as the cowmen were re-tying them. He was positive that he had seen one of the ruffians before, but could not place him.

While this was going on, Jim, who had procured a lantern and browsed about the ranch, returned to the house. Bindloss was in the room with Lieutenant Wingate at the moment, watching the Overland girls work over him. Hearing Jim enter, he stepped out.

"Oh! It's you, is it?"

"Yes. Boss, I been lookin' 'round heah a little an' I've diskivered some things. Thar was seven

men in that party. They went up to our camp fust, but didn't take nothin'. Then they come down heah an' tried to git in the corral. Thar's some bullet holes in the posts thar, which I reckon was made by Lieutenant Wingate's rifle. Thar's a rifle on the floor thar. Whose is that?"

"Mine," exclaimed the rancher, picking up the weapon and examining it. "The magazine is empty — fired off this evening."

"Jest so. Some of them bullets is in the stable now, an' some more of 'em hit them rough-necks, mebby killed 'em, I can't say. Leastwise they left some blood where two of 'em lay until they was carried away on hosses. Thar's tracks, too, that lead right up to that winder thar."

"Good work," complimented Bindloss. "What beats me, though, is how two of them happened to be tied down in the house."

"Three of 'em I trailed up to the winder. One of 'em went away in a hurry, but t'other two didn't. I reckon mebby they aire the two fellers that ye found heah. The party went south after they heard ye comin'. I reckon that's what started 'em away. I reckon they was tryin' to steal yer mustangs when Lieutenant Wingate put er crimp in their little picnic. Eh, Boss?"

"I reckon you're right, Jim. He must have fought them single-handed and when they were getting the worst of it they tried to set fire

to the ranch-house. I reckon we got here just in time."

"Yep. Things do work out queer-like sometimes," agreed the old guide. "Somebody's comin'! They're in a hurry, too," he warned.

A horse came to a sliding stop just outside of the ranch-house. A rapid exchange of words followed between the rider and the cowboys, then a dust-covered, breathless cowboy clanked in.

"Gosh a-mighty! What's broke loose now?" demanded the rancher. "Don't tell me something else has happened. Speak up! Are you tongue-tied?"

"The herd, Pop's herd, has jest been stampeded an' scattered into the foothills, and Pop's been shot. The fellers thet stampeded the herd give him his'n. They aire bringin' him in now," answered the rider excitedly.

Bindloss snatched up his rifle and bolted from the door. His cowpunchers already were in their saddles.

"Grace, if I am not needed here, I'll go, too," urged Tom.

"Yes, do," answered Grace Harlowe. "Tell Jim-Sam to stay. Be careful, Tom."

"Safety first," called back the Overland Rider as he dashed out after the rancher. "Jim-Sam, I hold you responsible for the safety of this place while we are away."

"Come on if you're going with me," shouted Bindloss.

"I'm with you," answered Tom, and in an incredibly short time the party was thundering down the valley.

## CHAPTER XIII

### AN OVERLANDER IS MISSING

THE vigil of the Overland girls lasted through the night. Along towards morning Lieutenant Wingate's breathing became more natural and his heart action better.

"I am inclined to think that he will regain consciousness soon," announced Miss Briggs. "If he does, it is not a fracture of the skull. Have courage, Nora," she added in answer to the appealing look from Mrs. Wingate, who had sat holding the wounded man's hand all night long.

"I've been trying to bring him back, and I've thought so hard that I just knew he would have to come back," murmured Nora.

Grace kissed her and patted her cheek.

"The imponderable quality lies deep in us all,"

observed Emma more to herself than to her companions.

In the meantime Jim and Sam were prowling about, now and then looking in to inquire how the patient was getting along, but spending a good part of their time at the Overland camp which commanded a fairly good view of the ranch buildings.

Shortly after daybreak, Hippy stirred and began to mutter. A few moments later he opened his eyes, blinked a few times, and smiled up into Nora's face. The Overland girl burst into tears.

"If you don't stop that at once out you go!" threatened Miss Briggs. "Hippy must have absolute quiet. Which shall it be?"

"I'll be quiet," promised Nora, conquering the sobs that rose to her lips.

There was instant silence in the room, and in a few moments Hippy Wingate sank into a natural sleep, from which he did not awaken until late in the morning. After some nourishment was given him, he asked for explanations.

The girls told him how they had found him, and asked him what had occurred before he was put out by a bullet. Hippy related all that he could remember of the occurrences of the previous night. They then insisted on his going to sleep again, which he was quite willing and ready to do.

No one had been near the stable where the

prisoners were held, though Jim-Sam had made occasional tours of inspection about the building throughout the night. The key to the stable was in the pocket of Two-gun Pete, so, though the prisoners must be hungry, it was plain that they would get nothing to eat until the return of the rancher and his party.

Bindloss, and those that had gone out with him, returned shortly before noon worn and angry. Emma met them in front of the ranch-house waving her hat and smiling.

"It's all right," she cried in answer to a volley of questions about Hippy. "He is sleeping now."

"Whoo—pe-e-e!" howled the boys.

"Shut up! The man's asleep!" rebuked Joe Bindloss, getting down from his saddle and stamping about to get the kinks out of his legs, for he had not been out of the saddle in many hours.

At this juncture Grace appeared at the door of the ranch-house and waved a hand at them.

"The lieutenant is awake now and he would like to see you, Mr. Bindloss," she informed the rancher.

Bindloss limped in, and the cowboys, not to be denied what they were certain would prove to be an interesting interview, flung themselves from their ponies and trooped in. They were crowded about the door of the injured man's room by the

time Joe Bindloss gripped the Overland Rider's hand.

Hippy sat propped up in bed, his head swathed in bandages, and he grinned at the solemn faces of the cowpunchers.

"I got mine again, fellows. Regular tenderfoot, eh?"

The cowpunchers shook their heads.

"Wal, now, tell me 'bout it," urged the rancher.

To save Hippy from another wearisome recital, Miss Briggs repeated what he had already related of his experiences. The lines of the cowboy countenances grew taut during the recital, but no word was uttered. They were held by the words of Elfreda Briggs, spoken without attempt at embellishment.

"An' you got two of 'em. Well, I'll be struck dead if that ain't the limit. Boys, what do you think 'bout this outfit being tenderfeet?" he demanded, turning brusquely to his men.

The cowboys shifted uneasily and fumbled their hats.

"Boss, I reckon we got to git somebody fer thet. What 'bout Pop? Is he daid?" demanded Idaho.

"No. He isn't badly hurt. Shot through the shoulder, that's all," smiled J. Elfreda. "He is in the bunk-house. Mrs. Gray fixed him up and Sam has been looking after him. I shall go over

again soon and look him over. The lieutenant being the worse hurt demanded most of our attention, though Pop has not been neglected," Elfreda informed them.

"I think the prisoners may need attention by this time," suggested Grace. "They must be hungry."

Bindloss growled.

"All right. Pete, see that they get something to eat. Find out if they are ready to talk and let me know."

"Thank you," said Grace smilingly.

"Hippy, you've done me a big service. I don't know what to say," resumed the rancher.

"Don't say anything. I had to fight to save my own skin," answered Hippy.

"A good many folks would have hid in the cellar," chuckled Bindloss. "Catching those two rough-necks was the cleverest thing that's been done in Coso Valley, and I reckon the record will stand for some time. Feel all right?"

"Sore, but happy, Mr. Bindloss. Tell me what happened below. The girls said there was trouble with the Number Six herd and that Pop had been wounded."

Bindloss's face contracted.

"The miserable coyotes! I mean that mountain gang. Yes, they stampeded the herd and run them into the foothills. They got some of

the stock, too, but I don't know how many head. The whole bunch got away before we got down there, though they left several snipers as a sort of rear guard, and they took pot shots at us when the boys tried to get on the trail of the stolen stock. We got the stock rounded up, what was left of it, and drove it in with another herd. The boys are finishing rounding up on that section today. I reckon they can get along without me. Pete and the bunch are going back later. We've got two of the thieves here, anyway, and they are going to jail when we get ready to turn them over. I reckon they are going to talk some first, though."

"Can't your men trail the rustlers?" asked Miss Briggs.

"Not far. You don't know these mountains. They could hide up a bunch of cattle for months and no one could find them unless he just happened to stumble onto the hiding place. The best we can do is to find out who the boss of that thieving outfit is and shoot him up. I reckon that's what's going to be did, too. By the way, where's your fat friend, Stacy? It's a wonder he isn't around with some suggestions to offer."

The Overlanders looked at each other with growing concern in their faces.

"St—acy!" exclaimed Nora.

"Mercy! With all the excitement we have

forgotten all about that young man," spoke up Emma. "Why, he didn't return with us last night, did he?"

"He is all right. Don't worry. You will find him with the punchers rounding up steers and howling like an Indian," soothed Lieutenant Wingate.

Bindloss strode to the door and shouted "Pete!" Two-gun came running.

"Whar's Brown, Stacy Brown?"

"I — I thought he was heah. Ain't he?"

"No. Was he with the men rounding up this morning?"

Pete shook his head and a troubled look crept into his face.

"When did you last see him?"

"Le' me see. It was last night jest before we got er call to come up heah. He was ridin' up towards the foothills on the east side, I reckon to see what the boys was doin' up thet way. As I recommember thar warn't any of the boys on thet side jest then."

"You are certain that he isn't with the outfit?" urged Bindloss.

"Daid shore, Boss."

"Then where is he?" demanded the rancher with a rising inflection in his voice.

Two-gun Pete shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I reckon somethin' has happened to thet feller," he observed solemnly.

Tom Gray ran to the door and shouted for Jim-Sam.

"We will start the guides out at once. Something has gone wrong with Chunky, that's certain, but if anyone can find him Jim-Sam can," he said.

"I'll send Pete and a couple of the others with them," announced the rancher, who was more disturbed than he cared to have the Overland Riders see. "Pete! You know what to do. Get the boy, that's all."

Jim-Sam were entering the ranch-house, when Idaho burst in, thrusting the guides aside at the door.

"Boss! They've gone!" yelled Idaho.

"Gone? Who's gone?"

"The critters thet the Dude caught last night. They've got clean away. Somebody sawed a hole in the back of the stable and got 'em out!"

"Gosh a-mighty!" gasped Bindloss. "I ought to have done what I wanted to do and shot 'em both. But I'll do it yet! I'll do it yet!" he raged, stalking from the ranch-house on his way to the scene of the escape.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE LOST TRAIL

"I AM going back to the round-up, then over to see Malcolm Hornby," announced Joe Bindloss after returning from the stable, where he had gone to see for himself how the prisoners had escaped. "I hate the critter, but if we stock owners don't get together and organize to wipe out these thieves we shan't have any stock left by the end of the season."

"I'll go with you," offered Tom Gray.

"Sure, if you like. Pete, you and Idaho are to ride with us, leaving the rest here to protect the ranch. We mustn't leave the place alone again, but there's got to be some better protecting than there was last night," warned Bindloss. "I'll bet every steer on my ranch that if Lieutenant Wingate had been on his feet they wouldn't have got away — alive!"

"Tom, I am going, too," announced Grace.

"Rough riding, girlie," reminded Tom.

"Yes, I know. But I don't mind. Elfreda will remain with Hippy who will be all right if some-

one doesn't fire more bullets into him. She and Nora may be trusted to take good care of him. Perhaps Emma would like to go, too, especially if that big cowboy Pete is to accompany us," added Grace laughingly.

"Come along. You won't be satisfied unless you do," agreed Tom. "I will speak to Bindloss about it."

Grace said that there was no need to do that, and suggested further that she thought she might be of some assistance to the searchers, but the Overland girl did not explain what she meant by her last remark, nor did Tom think twice about it. His mind was troubled.

Emma answered the question of her joining the party before it was asked by announcing that she was going to ride with Two-gun Pete and Mr. Bindloss.

Arrangements were quickly made and after the situation had been explained to Lieutenant Wingate, Nora and Elfreda, the rancher and his party mounted their ponies, leaving Sierra in charge of the ranch with another cowboy and Sam Conifer to assist him.

"Do as well as ye did last night when ye let them fellers git away an' ye prob'bly'll git yer fool haid shot off," warned Sam as Jim swung into his saddle.

"That's all right so long as we leave another

wuss fool heah at the ranch," gave back Jim, and the party galloped away.

It was a hard ride, especially for Emma and Grace, but both girls stood up under it remarkably well. Only one stop was made and that was at a spring to water the ponies, after which the journey was resumed. The rancher and his party reached their destination about the middle of the afternoon, where the same scenes were being enacted as on the previous day. Cattle were milling and bawling, and above the roar came the calls of the cowpunchers, clear and distinct.

The herd engaged in the milling was much smaller than before because so many head had been cut out and sent to graze at another place, there to be guarded by men who would see to it that they neither got away nor were stolen, for these cattle soon were to be driven to market.

At Bindloss's direction, the men of the party separated and rode out to question the cowmen about Stacy, and after every man there had been interviewed, the searchers returned to the knoll where the girls were awaiting them.

"He hasn't been here since last night," Tom informed them. "The last seen of him was when he was riding up towards that knoll yonder where you see the red bushes. Whether or not he came back, no one seems to know."

"Then he possibly rode into the mountains and

got lost," suggested Emma. "That would be just like Stacy."

"I wish I might believe that it was nothing worse," answered Grace. "What is your idea, Mr. Bindloss?"

"That's a fair question, and I'll give you a fair answer. It is my hunch that the bunch that attacked the ranch is concerned in this case too. I'm going over to see Hornby, and you folks can either wait here for me or return to the ranch."

Grace asked permission to accompany him, which was rather begrudgingly granted, she thought. Emma elected to stay and watch the herding, and more especially to watch Two-gun Pete's antics with his mustang and tell him he was the finest horseman in the world. Emma had told that same thing to nearly every one of Old Joe Bindloss's punchers, and some day it was destined to result in a lively man-to-man fight.

The ride to Hornby's ranch occupied less than an hour, and Grace observed that Bindloss hailed the log cabin where Hornby lived, while still some little distance away. Judy answered the call and looked her amazement when she saw who the callers were.

"Pap's got an awful grouch on today. You'd better light out of here hot-foot, Pap Bindloss."

"Judy, I'm going to see your father. Where may I find him?"

"I reckon right heah! What do ye want?" The voice belonged to Malcolm Hornby.

Grace observed the man with keen interest. Hornby was short and wiry, his eyes keen, but revealing a vicious temper, while his face, probably from exposure to the open, was like wrinkled parchment. Yet he was not an old man, perhaps not more than fifty, with a quick, nervous manner that made one feel he would be a dangerous opponent in a fight.

"I want to talk with you, Hornby. Can we talk in private?" asked Bindloss. "I want to talk with you about two things. The first is about a young friend of mine named Stacy Brown who disappeared from the round-up last night, pony and all. I want your judgment, too. You know these hills better than I do."

"I don't know nothin' 'bout it. Why do ye come heah? Ye don't think I stole him, do ye?" The question was put with savage emphasis.

"Don't be foolish, Hornby. I need your advice, for I'm plumb locoed on this business," urged the rancher.

"Is that all ye got to say?"

"No. I have something else to say. Hornby, we're neighbors, not very good ones, but we're neighbors just the same, and neighbors should stand together. I suppose the rustlers have been at your herd as well as mine."

"I reckon if they keeps on I won't have a steer on four feet left," growled Hornby.

"Then will you join in with me, turn your men over and make a big drive with me to rid this part of the country of all those critters?"

"I reckon you an' me couldn't hitch up fer anything. We'd be for shootin' each other up 'fore we'd got out of the valley. You've got a rotten temper, an' when I'm riled up I ain't no good company either. Who be these folks that ye say is yer friends?"

"They are my friends, and that's all that need be said," retorted Bindloss with some heat, for he did not like the tone nor the insinuation in Hornby's reply.

While the men were talking, Grace had dismounted and she and Judy had strolled away and engaged in earnest conversation, during which Grace told her all that had happened at the Circle O ranch. What Grace especially wanted to convey was that, knowing the mountains as she did, Judy might be able to assist them in finding out what had happened to Stacy. Judy shook her head saying that she couldn't. Grace closed the subject instantly and walked back to Bindloss.

"Man!" cried the owner of the Circle O. "The ruffians not only tried to steal the ponies right out of my corral, but they shot my place all up and hit my friend, Lieutenant Wingate. He

caught two of them and shot some others, I reckon, but the two got away later on with the assistance of their friends. I've reached my limit, Hornby. The next thing I know I'll be killing somebody."

"Providin' they don't git ye first," leered Hornby. "I said ye had a rotten temper, and ye've proved it. Nope, Joe, you an' me can't hitch up nohow. I'll run my own shebang and I reckon ye can do the same with yours or quit. I don't give a dad-blasted rap which ye do. And as fer thet Lootenant friend of yours, tell him he'd better watch out and not git too handy with thet gun o' hissen, fer thar's some rough fellers in these mountains thet'd make hash of him instanter if ever they sot eyes on him. This ain't no place for dudes, Joe Bindloss, an' ye knows it as well as I do. Thet's all I got to say to ye."

Malcolm Hornby turned on his heel and strode into the house, ordering Judy to follow him. Judy, with lowered eyes, followed obediently without another word to Grace.

"How strangely that girl acts today, Mr. Bindloss," wondered Grace as she mounted her mustang and trotted away with the rancher.

"Judy's all right. The trouble is that old Hornby is wearing her down with his ornery temper until she is 'bout ready to bust out. I

hope she doesn't, because if she does it'll be a bad day for Pap."

"Has she no mother?"

"Mother died when she was a kid. That was 'bout the time I lost my wife. But I don't altogether understand what's got into Judy. She's acting mighty queer."

Grace nodded.

"There's your man Jim up there," said Bindloss, pointing to the foothills where the Overland guide was seen working about. At Grace's suggestion they rode to him. "Find it?" called the rancher as he and Grace approached.

"I thought as I had, but thar's been so many cattle an' so many hosses that it's a lost trail. The fellers say that Stacy war seen here'bouts. If he's smart he's left some sort o' trail, but I'll be shot if I kin find it."

"He would not think of that," answered Grace.

The pair rode on into the valley, both silent and thoughtful, and for the rest of the afternoon watched the work of rounding up. Just before dark Grace joined by Emma rode over to the foothills to see what Jim was accomplishing. He was now nowhere to be seen. Though Emma wanted to ride up farther into the hills, Grace decided that it would not be prudent, for night was coming on.

They ate their supper with cowboys beside a little campfire, and shortly after that started

homeward, accompanied by Mr. Bindloss and two of the men. Two-gun Pete was one of the party.

All were pleased to learn, on their arrival at the ranch, that Hippy had been sitting up and was coming along. Pop Skinner too, Elfreda said, was out of danger. Even the ranch-house had improved under the repairs that had been made that day.

Sam Conifer they found pacing about restlessly. He was full of eager questions about Jim, and seemed disturbed when they told him that his partner probably had found a trail and was following it.

On the following morning, with no tidings of the old guide, Sam asked permission to go in search of Jim. Permission was readily granted, and Sam was soon galloping away.

Conifer did not return until the late afternoon of the next day. He was riding hard when the Overlanders discovered him, and reeled in his saddle as he rode up to the ranch-house.

"Somethin's happened to Jim!" he cried. "I found whar it happened, and then I lost the trail. They've got him! They've got him, folks!"

"Sam! Sam! You have been hurt!" cried Nora. There was blood on Sam Conifer's face, and the left arm hung limp at his side. Before they could assist him, Sam essayed to dismount and pitched to the ground in a dead faint.

## CHAPTER XV

### CLEWS THAT WERE LOADED

IT was found that a bullet had hit the fleshy part of the old guide's left arm, and that there was considerable laceration. First aid was administered and the patient restored to consciousness.

"Quite a hospital we have here, Mr. Bindloss," observed J. Elfreda after she had done all she could for Sam.

"A-huh! What made the old fellow faint like that? He must be getting old."

"Loss of blood made him faint. So it would you. He will shortly be able to tell us how he got the wound."

"I'll talk now. I'm so full of it I've got to talk. I'm an old idiot! No mistake 'bout that," rumbled Sam. "I must talk, fer somethin' has got to be did. They've got Jim, an' I reckons they've got the fat boy, too."

"Take it easy like," urged the rancher. "No hurry at all. Does he want something to eat?"

"We are preparing something. Pete has killed

a chicken and Nora is making broth for him," replied Miss Briggs.

"Huh! Reckon you folks think you own this ranch, eh?" demanded the owner, his eyes twinkling.

"We might were we to sue for the damage we have sustained here," retorted Emma snappily.

"Oh, ho! I reckon you're right," agreed Bindloss. "What's on your mind, Conifer?"

"I found the trail!"

"You did?" cried Tom Gray.

"Yes, but that ain't all. It was a fixed trail to make the finder reckon that Jim had made it hisself so we could foller him. I swallered the bait an' the hook an' the line too. I fust found whar thar'd been a scrimmage, an' I found Jim's heel marks right thar. Then they disappeared jest as if he'd gone up into the air. He'd been boosted to the back of a hoss. Ye never seen no hoss track so a-mighty plain. Well, I follered right on. Jim wouldn't have made that mistake. He'd jest kinder sneaked. Then I got mine."

"How far into the hills did you get?" interrupted the rancher.

"'Bout half a mile. Wal, as I was sayin', all of a sudden I heard somethin' like someone had stepped on a stick back of some juniper bushes. I didn't like thet sound; I knowed thar was a gun behind it, so I jest naturally got ready for

trouble, but trouble got me first. The feller shot, an' I shot. The only difference was thet he had a plain mark to shoot at an' I didn't. He hit me in the arm, an' then I shot thet juniper bush so full of holes that it won't make no shade till next summer."

"Did — did you hit him?" questioned Emma eagerly.

"I hit somethin' that grunted, but the grunter got away from me. I stalked him fer two hour, but couldn't even find his tracks, though I did find some blood thar, an' if he'd a looked he'd found a heap sight more blood whar I was. If thet feller hit what he shot at thar's only one man in this heah neck of the world thet could do it, an' he's the feller I'm lookin' fer. When I find him, one or t'other of us 'll go down an' stay down. Thet's shore," threatened Sam grimly.

"I don't understand how Jim could have been caught in broad daylight," wondered Tom.

"Thar's only one way, onless they shot him, which I don't reckon they did, jedging from the look of the trail. Folks, they roped him jest like they'd rope an old maverick steer. I reckon mebby that's what happened to Stacy."

"Yes. But why, why?"

"Ye kin search me. I'll be all right after I gits a few hours' sleep an' some chuck; then I'm goin' to hit the trail agin, and I'll bet ye this

trail won't be loaded. Leastwise, I'll dodge the loaded places."

"Samuel, you will not be hitting any trail just yet," admonished Miss Briggs. "I think you had better stop talking now. Your broth will be ready in a few moments, after which you are going to sleep." Elfreda motioned to the others to leave, which they did, and half an hour later Sam was sleeping soundly. Elfreda thereupon went out to the front porch where Bindloss, Tom and the others of the Overland party were awaiting her.

Bindloss said they had been discussing the situation, and that not only for their sakes, but for the sake of his business in the Coso Valley, something must be done to check the outlawry that had been going on and that was getting worse.

"Have you appealed to the law?" asked Miss Briggs.

The rancher laughed, but without mirth.

"The sheriff has been after this gang for three months, but that's as far as the law has ever got. The law has never caught up with the gang. There's some fellow with a head bossing that gang, and they ought to be getting rich judging from the stock they've stolen from me."

"If you wish to make a drive and try to clean them up perhaps we can assist you," offered Tom.

"I've been thinking of that," replied Bindloss reflectively. "I don't reckon, though, that I want you folks to get mixed up in it, for somebody is sure to get hurt," he added.

"It occurs to me that someone already has," observed Miss Briggs wisely. "You must remember that, having lost one of our party and one guide, we are not wholly disinterested spectators, and should Stacy not get back, we probably shall organize a drive on our own hook."

"What are your plans, Bindloss? What have you in mind?" asked Tom Gray.

"'Bout that matter? I can't do anything till we get finished with the round-up. When that's done we'll turn some of our cowpunchers loose, letting Pete lead them, for Pete is a natural leader and can shoot, and he knows the mountains better than any other fellow on the range. In the meantime, if Sam gets fit, we will ask him to scout and see if he can find the hang-out of the ruffians. It will be a ticklish job, but I suppose it can be done. Miss Briggs, when do you think the old man will be able to start?"

"He should lay up for a week, but I do not believe it will be possible to hold him that long," replied Elfreda.

"Leave Stacy all that time without doing anything to help him?" wailed Nora.

Grace explained that all was being done that

could be done, and that a few days more or less probably would be none the worse for the missing Overland boy. She said the delay would enable them to perfect their plans for the proposed man-hunt, and that in the meantime the ruffians might make a slip and place themselves in the hands of the men of Circle O. Bindloss nodded his approval, and there the matter was left.

Conifer improved much more rapidly than Elfreda had thought possible and two days later Hippy, on his feet again, was walking about, limping ever so little, his head swathed in bandages and his face lined and pale.

"I've been down long enough," he told Bindloss. "It is time that I was out and looking for that nephew of mine, Chunky Brown. Conifer declares that he is going out to-morrow and I'm going with him."

"You are not," replied the rancher. "Man, it'll kill you! Conifer wasn't hit like you and he has his right hand as good as ever. There's lots of fight left in the old man yet, and if we don't let him go he will worry himself and the rest of us to death. No, Lieutenant, you keep your hosses staked down and get lazy for a few days more. I promise you there will be plenty of excitement and activity for you and the rest of us when we start that man hunt."

The Overlanders were as emphatic as Bindloss

had been, and Hippy, much against his will, submitted to their demand that he stay at the ranch. Conifer, too, was ordered by Miss Briggs to defer his departure, so that it was the latter part of that week before she gave him permission to take the trail on the following day.

That night, however, something occurred to change the plans of Bindloss and his guests. Two-gun Pete, who had come in late from the range, had discovered a man prowling about the stable. Pete hailed him and the man ran, whereupon the cowboy fired six shots at him, but in the darkness all his bullets went wild.

The firing awakened the occupants of the ranch-house and the Overland camp, and in a few minutes all hands were on the scene, armed and ready for whatever might be required of them. Guards were thrown out to protect the place from a surprise attack. The prowler had disappeared, but he had left a plain trail to a point where his mustang had been staked down. From there his tracks led into the foothills, but the direction he took upon entering the hills was no indication of his probable destination.

"I found something," shouted Idaho who had just come around the corner of the corral with his lantern and passed down at the rear of the stable. The Overlanders and Bindloss found him carrying a large basket at arm's length. Idaho plainly was

suspicious of that basket, and he proposed to take no chances with it. For all he knew it might be full of rattlers.

No one made a move to investigate the basket's contents as Idaho put it down on the ground and backed away.

"Perhaps the man went away in such haste he forgot his luncheon," suggested Emma whimsically, which caused a laugh and relieved the tension somewhat.

"You are a lot of tenderfeet," averred Hippy, limping over and peering down at the basket. He gave it a gentle shake.

"Oh, Hippy darlin'! Be careful," begged Nora.

"Be quiet! There is something alive in here," warned Lieutenant Wingate, giving the basket another shake, whereupon his companions distinctly heard familiar sounds coming from it.

"Birds! Well, what do you folks know about that? Someone has made us a present of a basket of birds, perhaps blackbirds with which to make a pie," chortled Hippy.

The basket cover was secured with a piece of wire, which the Overlander unwound and cautiously peered within while Tom Gray held a lantern to enable Hippy to see. He thrust a hand in and brought out a bird, holding it up for the others to look at.

"Bindloss, what do you think of our present?" he cried jovially.

"Well, I'll be shot!" exclaimed the rancher. "What fool is carrying 'round a basket of birds?" The rancher laughed uproariously.

Tom Gray took one look at the bird and uttered an exclamation under his breath, then after cautiously peering into the basket, being careful that none of the other birds there made its escape, he got up and faced his companions with a puzzled expression in his eyes.

At this instant, Grace and Elfreda also discovered what both Tom and Hippy already knew.

"A carrier pigeon!" exclaimed Miss Briggs wonderingly. "Are they all carriers?"

"All carriers, and fully equipped for business," Tom informed them. "Are we back in France in the war?"

Hippy turned the basket about so that the light would shine on the other side of it, and made a fresh discovery, more important, even, than the discovery of the carrier pigeons. They heard him utter an exclamation and saw him remove something that was hanging to the handle and tied to it with a leather thong.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE CARRIER PIGEONS' FLIGHT

"A LETTER!" cried Emma. "Isn't this perfectly romantic?"

"If it is a letter, it's a crumby looking one," observed Hippy. "Tom, hold that lantern so I can see."

The Overlanders crowded up closer, with Bindloss in the forefront, the cowpunchers peering over their heads and shoulders, as Hippy began to unfold a sheet that had once been wrapping paper. One keen look at it and Lieutenant Wingate uttered a yell and began hopping up and down with most of his weight on one foot.

"Chunky! It's from Chunky," he cried.

"Read it! This suspense is killing me," wailed Emma.

"It is addressed to the Overlanders and to Joe Bindloss. He spells it 'Bindlass,' and —"

"Never mind the spelling. Read it!" urged Miss Briggs.

"And it reads as follows," continued Hippy.

"'Dear Folks: You'll be surprised to hear from

me, and more so to hear that I'm in Dutch. I'm in the hands of a gang of ruffians — gentlemen — ' The word ruffians has been crossed out and the word gentlemen added," explained Hippy.

"You are the most aggravating person I ever knew. Will you please read that letter or let me do it for you?" begged Miss Briggs.

"'They caught me with a rope when I wasn't looking, down by the round-up, and I've stayed caught. They know that I'm valuable and they want a price for me,'" continued Hippy, reading Stacy's scrawl with considerable difficulty. "'If they don't get it they propose to throw me off the mountain into the red gulch just back of the cabin that I'm in. They want five hundred dollars for me and you're to send it by the birds that they are going to send with this letter. Put only one bill on each bird's leg because they're union birds and won't carry a man-sized load. I don't know how or where they got the birds, but they've got 'em. I know because I've seen 'em. When they get the money they are going to take me to the foothills and kick me out, but if they don't get it I'm to go out the way I told you. Please hurry. I haven't had a square meal since I got tangled up with that fellow's rope, but the scenery certainly is fine up here. Help! Help! Help!

"(Signed) 'Lovingly, STACY.'"

"It's from Chunky!"

"'P. S. If you try to find me they say they will throw me over anyway. If you haven't big enough bills, for the love of heaven keep on sending small ones so long as the birds hold out, but send them!'

"'P. P. S. The beans they are feeding me on up here are awful, but the coffee is worse. S. B.'

"'P. P. P. S. They say they are going to send this by rural free delivery, but if it's as slow as it is back home I won't need any help by the time it reaches you. For heaven sake, feed the birds and give them plenty of pepper, so they'll have pep and hustle —'"

The message broke off suddenly as if the writer had been interrupted, at least that was the way the Overlanders construed it.

"Gosh a-mighty! If that ain't the limit!" exclaimed Bindloss. "How can those birds carry money or anything else, and how will they get back where the robbers want them to go?"

Tom Gray explained that carrier pigeons carried messages in little oiled paper tubes such as these birds had on their legs, and that when released they got their direction quickly and flew straight back to their cotes.

"I know! I know," exclaimed Bindloss. "A fellow over at Carrago had a flock of 'em, but the government took 'em over after the war started. They paid him five dollars a head for the birds,

then, after the war, what was left of 'em he bought back from the government at twenty-five cents a head."

"There's our clue," interrupted Hippy. "Should we fail otherwise we can find out who the pigeon man is. But I don't reckon we shall need to do that. Folks, what is your idea?"

"I shouldn't be in favor of paying five hundred dollars for Stacy," objected Emma. "If they keep him long enough to get really acquainted with him they will be glad to take a bargain-counter price for him."

Bindloss suggested that they go into the house, and Tom asked him to invite Idaho and Pete to go in with them, which was done. Sam Conifer met them on the porch, and his first question was whether or not they had heard from Jim. The situation was quickly explained to him. When informed that there was no news from the missing Jim, the guide's whiskers drooped.

"I reckon Jim's thar, but they wouldn't let the boy writ 'bout it," he exclaimed, his whiskers suddenly bristling as of old. "I'll git 'em! They've played a card into my hands now!" he raged. "I'll follow 'em now."

"Are you going to fly, Sam?" questioned Emma. "That is the only way I know of to follow birds."

It was a poser. Two-gun Pete asked if he

might make a suggestion. His suggestion was that they liberate a bird and watch its direction, then follow out that direction until they finally found the hiding place of the rustlers.

"Peter, you sure have brains," complimented Hippy.

"I love a man with brains," bubbled Emma, amid smiles and nods, all of which embarrassed Two-gun very much.

"That's the idea," cried Tom. "Has anyone additional suggestions to make?"

"I have," answered Misss Briggs. "Peter has given us something to work from, and all it needs is elaboration. See what you think of this. Give a bird five dollars and liberate him just after daylight, as they used to do in France. Watch the course he takes, then let our men take up positions on that course as nearly in line with the bird's flight as possible, lining up about a mile apart. At a certain hour we will free a second bird, also with a five-dollar bill. One of our men on the lookout will surely see it. The ruffians may be a long way from here, but so long as the bird's course can be kept in sight, its home roost can be found."

"Good generalship," agreed Tom, nodding.

"Right you are," approved Bindloss. "But five dollars! I don't like to give them robbers even five cents."

"Sam, do you feel equal to going with us?" asked Grace, turning to the old guide.

"I'm goin', an' I ain't comin' back till I gits Jim," he answered grimly.

"Five dollars sent out with each bird won't break us. That will make sixty dollars if we send out the entire dozen, which is a pretty high price to pay for Chunky," declared Emma.

The Overlanders rebuked her, and after further discussion it was decided to liberate the first bird at daybreak and a second bird at noon. As soon as the first carrier gave them the direction, the men were to proceed singly into the hills, going with as much secrecy and caution as possible, take up positions and await the noon bird.

Miss Briggs suggested that the men arrange to get in touch with each other at the end of the first hour following the passage of each bird, and that the first to discover the hiding place of the rustlers was to go back and wait for his companions so that they might attack in force.

"Gosh a-mighty!" cried Joe Bindloss. "Is there anything that you folks can't do?"

"One bird every two hours after twelve and up to four, then send all but two between that and six," suggested Hippy. "Better keep two over. Send a message with the last bird that the last two birds of the lot will be liberated in the morning, as soon as the rest of the money can

be procured. Now who is going? I, for one, am going out."

Every person present volunteered, but it was finally settled that Sam, Pete, Idaho, Tom Gray and Hippy should go. Sam insisted on taking the lead, and the position was assigned to him. Bindloss and some of his men were to remain at the ranch-house to guard against a possible raid.

The party soon thereafter turned in for what rest they could get, but first the birds were put in a larger basket so that they might be more comfortable and rest up for the journey ahead of them.

The ranch-house inhabitants were astir before daylight next morning. Food was given to the birds as soon as day dawned, and a tube packed with a five-dollar bill and a brief message that the money would be sent along as rapidly as possible was attached to a pigeon's leg.

The sun was rising when Tom Gray brought out the first pigeon that was to make the flight.

"The dove of peace! What?" chuckled Tom, tossing the bird into the air.

The carrier pigeon fluttered about with rapidly beating wings for a few seconds, then began circling upwards, taking wider and wider circles as it rose, every eye eagerly fixed on it. The Overlanders had thought that its direction would be east, but suddenly the bird straightened out,

taking a course a little south of west, heading for the Coso Mountains.

"Everyone watch him!" urged Tom.

Grace and Elfreda were following the flight with their glasses, but the keen eyes of the ranchers needed no such aid, and readily followed the flight until the bird had disappeared over a mountain.

"I got it!" shouted Sam.

"So hev I," announced Pete. "Got the landmarks daid to rights. Be ye ready, Sam?"

Sam was, and after an uneasy half hour's wait he rode off to the south, jogging along slowly. He was followed after an interval by Lieutenant Wingate, and following him were Tom Gray, Two-gun Pete and Idaho in the order named. Each man knew that he might expect to be shot from ambush, but the opportunity to meet up with the mountain ruffians outweighed all other considerations.

In a short time all were out of sight, and the party left at the ranch settled down to wait for the hour when they were to liberate another pigeon, and at the same time to listen with straining ears for the sound of firing in the hills, which each one momentarily expected to hear.

## CHAPTER XVII

### STACY DECIDES TO LEAVE

THE night that Stacy Brown was roped from his mustang he was put to sleep with a whack applied to his head from the butt of a revolver. When he awakened he found himself lashed to the back of a pony, traveling over a rough mountain trail. The pony was being led and there were men ahead and men to the rear. The fat boy could hear them speak at intervals.

It did not seem to be a long journey, and the party finally pulled up before a cabin that Stacy observed was well hidden in a narrow rocky pass that was approached on three sides by way of a steep granite slope, while on the other side, as he later learned, a precipitous gorge dropped away for hundreds of feet.

The Overland boy was removed from the horse and carried to a lean-to against the rear of the cabin in which horse equipment and weapons were stored. He was unceremoniously dumped into this place and left to his own reflections. For

some time he heard men talking in the cabin, then silence settled over the place. It was near noon of the following day before food was brought to him and his hands were freed. After eating he was subjected to a grilling examination as to who he was and what his party were doing in the Coso Valley, and when he answered in his characteristic independent way one of the ruffians struck him a blow in the face that once more put the Overland boy to sleep.

At least twice each night thereafter he was asked the same questions, and each time the interview ended in a blow or a violent kick until Chunky was sore all over.

Occasionally he was permitted to sit or lie outdoors, and at such times Stacy used his eyes and ears to the best advantage. However, there was little for him to see except the scenery that he mentioned in his letter.

His captors were away most of the time, though ordinarily there was one man prowling about, principally engaged in surveying the surrounding mountains from a vantage point on a rock. Then one evening came the order to Stacy to write the letter to the Overland party. He obeyed eagerly, for he was anxious to get away at any price — so long as the price was paid by someone other than himself. Stacy had slight hopes, though, that his companions would give so great a ransom.

It was early in the evening of the following night when he heard more than the usual number of voices in the cabin. Voices now and then were pitched high, sometimes in anger. Stacy cautiously rolled close to the door communicating with the cabin and lay listening. His hopes rose high when he learned that some of the birds had returned with money. Two of the ruffians had come in with tidings that four birds were still missing, which revealed to Stacy the fact that the pigeons were not kept at the cabin. The one, however, which carried the answer to the demand of the rustlers, and that most concerned the men, had just come in, and its message was a subject of discussion. One ruffian was of the opinion that either Bindloss or the Overlanders were trying to play a sharp trick on them and search out their hiding place. He was laughed at.

"How kin anybody foller er bird flyin' high?" demanded another, whereat the ruffians laughed more uproariously than before. The feel of the money that the pigeons had brought, outweighed their caution. This was easy money, and there was more of it coming.

"We'll git all we kin fer this feller, an' then make a price on t'other feller's haid, an' we'll make er clean-up," chuckled another. "It ain't the first time thet them birds has done us a good turn, but never jest in this heah way."

At the mention of another captive on whose head a price was to be set, the fat boy pricked up his ears. He wondered whom else the ruffians had captured, and where the other captive was being held. This was interesting, but what followed was more so.

From the talk Stacy overheard he learned that, after the ruffians had gotten all the money they could out of the Overlanders, the prisoners were to be disposed of.

"They knows too much to let 'em git away, especially thet fat feller. He's too fresh anyway," averred one.

"Best way is to take 'em out on a dark night, turn 'em 'round a few times and head 'em fer the canyon, an' tell 'em to git home a-whooping. Ain't no need fer us to do nothing more'n thet. They'll do the rest," advised another.

"Thet's the ticket, Charlie!" complimented another. "We'll make 'em walk the plank, an' the buzzards 'll do the rest." The ruffians roared. It would be great sport and it would make disposal of their captives a most simple matter.

Stacy Brown did not laugh. Instead, he swallowed hard, and a heavy frown wrinkled his forehead.

"That's what I call a low-down trick," he muttered. "Going to get all the money they can for me and the other fellow and then send us

out to walk on air. Wow! Stacy Brown, I reckon it's time for you to leave." He gazed out through the open door of the lean-to and contemplated the possibility of rolling out and trying to escape. That did not seem to be feasible, so he pondered, strained cautiously at the ropes with which he was tied, and decided that he must think of something else.

"If I could get hold of a hunting knife I might manage it," he thought, but did not recall having seen any such thing among the assortment of equipment in the lean-to. Then an idea occurred to him.

"The axe!" exclaimed the fat boy, and instantly began rolling towards the door, just outside of which he had seen an axe that very day. He found the axe and after several failures Stacy succeeded in getting it between his knees blade up, and began sawing at the rope that bound his wrists. The rope soon fell apart. Stacy could scarcely repress a howl of delight. It was now the work of only a moment to free his legs, and the Overland boy, still clinging to the axe as a weapon in case of discovery, began considering his next move. He knew about where the ruffians' ponies were tethered, because he had heard them stamping many times.

"Now, if I had a gun I'd be — Sure I have!" He felt along the rear wall of the lean-to, where

among saddles and bridles hung holsters with weapons in them, and ammunition belts, and rifles of quite modern pattern hanging from nails in the wall.

The fat boy quickly helped himself to two revolvers and a rifle, each of which he found loaded. That gave him fresh courage. He might be surprised, but it was his idea that the other fellow might be more so. Stacy, armed and eager, crept from the lean-to and picked his way cautiously towards the spot at the base of the granite slope where he hoped to find the rustlers' horses tethered. They were not there, but he found them about a hundred yards to the left, all saddled and bridled, ready for instant use in case of need.

There appeared to be no one on guard, but, though he did not know it, two men were stationed a short distance from the cabin on the Coso Valley side of the mountain hiding place. Fortunately for him, the fat boy was on the other side.

Stacy selected a mount, and, finding a rifle in the saddle boot, he threw away the one he had taken from the lean-to.

"I wish I dared to shoot up that place," he muttered, gazing off towards the cabin which he could not now see. "I'll come back and do it."

Stacy led the mustang along carefully for a

while, taking what he believed to be an easterly course, and getting his bearings from the stars so that he might not travel in a circle and bring up at his starting point.

There appearing to be no pursuit, the boy finally mounted and rode away with increasing speed and rising spirits. He continued on until towards daylight when he found himself descending into what he believed to be foothills, but which proved to be grazing grounds in the mountains. They were of vast extent, covering many acres, and over this mesa Stacy wandered for hours trying to find a way out. He was hungry, ravenously so now, and a search of the saddle-bags revealed not even a biscuit.

Noon came and, well-nigh famished, he turned the mustang into the chaparral determined to find a new trail. The boy had gone in but a short distance when he began to sniff the air. Even the mustang lifted its head and snorted.

"If that isn't food smoke I never smelled any. Stacy Brown, follow your nose, for your nose knows. Gid-ap, you lazy lout!" he cried.

Perhaps the pony really knew, for it pricked up its ears with new interest and seemed eager to go on, and a few moments later Stacy discovered a shack ahead. The smoke odor was by now quite strong.

The boy approached the shack with caution,

and rode twice around it before deciding to hail. When he finally did so there was no answer, so he dismounted and entered.

What he had come upon was a chuck-house where mountain herders got their meals.

That a meal had quite recently been eaten there was evidenced by the soiled dishes still on the table, and the food that was simmering in frying pans on the stove.

"Eats! I don't know who it belongs to, but I know when I am hungry," cried Stacy, helping himself to several slices of bacon from a frying pan and eating them out of his hand. There was bread, too, and coffee in the pots. Stacy tasted the coffee and made a wry face.

"Worse than the rustlers made," he complained.

Had the Overland Rider not been so fully occupied with satisfying his hunger, he probably would have been more observant. As it was he did not see a horseman ride up, dismount and peer into the shack. Nor did he see the fellow's expression when he looked over Stacy's mount. The newcomer rode away quietly to a distance and then put his pony to a run.

Half an hour later while the boy was still eating, and just as he was about to place a biscuit in his mouth, a voice out of the silence arrested him.

"Put up yer hands, young feller! I've got ye covered," warned the voice.

The hand that held the biscuit was already raised to a level with his mouth, and the other promptly went above his head.

"Turn around, an' let's git a look at ye!"

Stacy turned and found himself facing a weapon in the hands of a man at the door. Just to the rear of the man with the gun were half a dozen others.

"Tough-lookin' critter, all right. Who be ye?" demanded the hold-up man.

"Name's Brown," answered the fat boy, transferring the biscuit to his mouth and beginning to chew on it.

"Whar'd ye git that cayuse?"

"Maybe I stole him," answered Chunky thickly, for the biscuit was large. "What difference does it make to you where I got him?"

"It may make a lot of difference to ye, young feller. I reckon mebby ye knows thet thet critter belongs to the Diamond Bar ranch, an' thet he was stole from thar three days ago. Turn round while I relieve ye of some of thet hardware."

Stacy ceased chewing and stood with arms uplifted while his weapons and cartridge belt were being removed, following which he was roughly yanked around facing his captors.

"You be careful, you rough-necks. You'll find

out that I'm a bad man when I get riled," warned Chunky boastfully.

"I reckon ye be all of thet. Jest now ye ain't, an' 'fore long mebby ye won't be nothin' 'tall. Yer under arrest!" announced the spokesman.

"Wha—at for?" gasped the Overland boy, his face losing some of its color.

"Horse stealin'! Thet's all!"

A strong hand was fastened on Stacy's collar and he was roughly jerked out of the cabin and thrown on the pony that he was accused of having rustled. It began to dawn on Stacy Brown that he was in a serious predicament.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### TROUBLE AT RED GULCH

THE second bird was liberated at noon, and was quickly on its way, observed eagerly by the girls of the Overland unit and their companions of the Circle O ranch. The pigeon did not seem to deviate a hair's breadth from the line followed by the first bird.

"Isn't it wonderful to be a bird and go where the wind listeth?" murmured Emma Dean.

"It would be, but they don't," answered Miss Briggs laughingly. "Wind is the pigeon's enemy and unless it is with them they have to fight it, and in doing so are frequently lost. I happen to know some things about carrier pigeons, for I have seen them work and heard much about them in France. Once a pigeon becomes lost and has to come down, he loses his ambition, or his confidence, or something — at least something seems to have gone out of him, and, even if he returns at all, he seldom can be depended upon to make another flight. I venture to say that not all the birds we are sending out will reach their loft."

"So long as the boys see the majority of them we do not care," said Nora. "Oh, I hope they do."

The boys did — that is, Hippy, Sam and Pete saw the second bird going over and watched it until it flew out of sight. Now they knew that they were on the right trail. The five o'clock bird was the last one seen by any of the men, and it was Lieutenant Wingate who discovered it. The bird was flying so low that it seemed to be skimming the tops of the slender mountain pines. Observing this Hippy hurried on to join Sam Conifer, whom he found in about half an hour.

"Go easy from now on, Sam," he cautioned.

"You know somethin'?" demanded the guide.

"The bird that just went over was flying very low. That indicates that he has located his cote and is reaching for it. I do not believe it can be more than a mile or two away from here. Shall I take the lead now?"

"No! I'll take it myself," snapped the guide. Sam was irritable, but Hippy laid it to the guide's wound and his weakened condition. As a matter of fact it was neither. Sam's nerves were on edge and his rheumatic fingers were "crinkling," for he could almost feel the feel of a gun in his right hand.

"Very well. I shall keep up close to you, just the same," announced Hippy. "If you come

upon something you'll need assistance. The men at the rear are instructed not to shoot until they are positive about what they are shooting at, so there is not much danger of their firing at us."

Sam answered with a grunt and started on. Half an hour later he halted to wait for his companion to come up to him.

"What is it?" whispered Hippy.

"I got er whiff o' smoke. Mebby it's the makin's o' a forest fire, an' mebby 'tain't. We'll leave the ponies heah an' go on afoot. Ye better wait an' tell 'em so they don't blunder on an' spoil the game."

The "game"! What a game it was, a game of life and death, thought Lieutenant Hippy Wingate, as he tethered the mustangs at one side of the trail and sat down to rest and wait.

It was about this time that Stacy Brown was taking his departure from the cabin of the mountain ruffians, not dreaming that a friend was so near at hand. In the meantime Sam had begun moving forward slowly, making scarcely a sound, so light were his footsteps, the right hand nervously twitching over the protruding butt of his revolver.

The guide brought up sharply with his whiskers standing out at an angle, and listened attentively. He had heard a human laugh, and Sam knew quite well that it could not be behind him, for

his companions were not in a laughing mood that evening. He picked his way forward a little farther and again halted and listened.

A shout startled him and his muscles tensed. It was a shout of anger, at first sounding as though from a distance, then all at once near at hand. Stacy Brown's escape had been discovered, and the mountain ruffians were running about in search of him, but by this time the boy was some distance away. When it was discovered that one of the ponies was missing the rage of the rustlers knew no restraint, and each was seeking for an excuse to place the responsibility on his companions.

"Somethin' goin' on over thar, but I'm dadbusted if I knows what it's all 'bout," muttered Sam.

Two shots rang out almost as one, and the old gunman knew what that meant. Two rustlers had fired, but one had been a fraction of a second quicker than the other, and one probably was out of the fight, for there were no more shots, and the voices of the rustlers became more subdued.

Sam Conifer moved up a little closer. Lieutenant Wingate, too, had heard the shots and was growing restless, but dared not leave his position until Tom, Two-Gun and Idaho came up.

By this time Conifer had discovered the cabin. Fortunately for his purposes, all the rustlers were

now in the cabin excitedly discussing the escape of their prisoner, and considering what they had better do. It was the opinion of the wiser ones that Brown never would be able to find the place again, which was probably true, and that the other prisoner was still in their possession. It was decided, therefore, to keep a sharp lookout and collect all the money from the Overlanders that they possibly could, then dispose of the man they still held. It would not do to let that man get away.

As it developed later the two rustlers who had shot at each other had missed, whereupon their companions intervened and peace was restored, as Sam Conifer learned a few moments later from such snatches of conversation as he could catch.

The old guide crept up the granite slope a noiseless shadow, and as he neared the open door of the cabin he crouched with every faculty on the alert, his right hand twitching, eyes slowly searching the faces of the men under the light of a lantern swinging from a beam in the center of the room. Sam raised himself erect and glided noiselessly to the door. There he stood for a full minute, his gaze shifting from one to another of the men gathered there and finally coming to rest on the dark, swarthy face of one who looked to be a Mexican, and whose attitude and peremptory

speech plainly showed that he was the leader of the party.

"I've been thinkin'. The boy'll be home prob'ly some time in the morning, but he can't be 'lowed to git thar. We've got to put a man on his trail with a light, bad as it be to do thet, an' run him down afore he gits thar. Bad-Eye, it's up to you to do the job, an' if ye do it right, the boy'll be a dead dude by mornin'. If he ain't I'll go git him myself, fer he ain't no good."

"I reckon ye lie!"

It was a thunderbolt, hurled at them by Sam Conifer from the doorway, and half a dozen hands flew to as many revolver holsters.

"Put 'em back!"

The command was uttered with an incisiveness that cut like a keen-edged blade, and the hands of the mountain ruffians sagged away from their holsters ever so little.

"I've got somethin' to say to ye cayuses fust. After I gits finished ye kin shoot. Ye'r a fine bunch of mavericks, ain't ye?" drawled Sam.

## CHAPTER XIX

### A DUEL IN THE DARK

ORDINARILY long before this every gun in the room would have been trained on the intruder, but something restrained them. Perhaps it was the easy, confident manner of the man in the doorway. Then again, they well knew that a man who would voluntarily face that assemblage, and expect to get away with it, must have supreme confidence in himself. Whether or not that confidence was well placed, they proposed to find out sooner or later.

"I been lookin' fer ye fellers," announced Sam. "Now that I've found ye we'll have a little confab, so don't git smart an' feel fer yer guns, 'cause somethin' might happen. This heah right hand o' mine, though it's all crinkled up with the rheumatiz, now an' ag'in gits mighty nervous, an' it might throw a gun afore I could stop it. Jest like this":

His heavy Colt revolver flicked into Sam Conifer's hand as if by magic, and lay trembling there

in his palm. Then it slipped smoothly towards his finger tips as if doing so of its own volition, spun and slid without an apparent movement of the arm, always moving, now like a flash of light, then with slow easy grace, but, as it was observed by the keen eyes of the watchers, with the muzzle ever pointed towards him of the swarthy face.

As the weapon slipped back into its holster, and the rheumatic hand of the old guide lay trembling on its butt, a look of relief passed over the face of the dark mountaineer.

The others in the cabin looked their amazement, for few there had ever seen a gun handled as this old, stoop-shouldered intruder handled his. It was a revelation, though not a pleasant one. It was a warning as well, but they were watching him — watching and waiting for that moment when the old man's alert, shifting glances should wander from some of them for a few golden seconds.

"Say, ye feller! Who be ye?" demanded the dark man. "What do ye mean by holdin' up a bunch o' honest prospectors?"

Sam Conifer grinned sardonically.

"Honest, did ye say? You don't know the meanin' o' that word. Them's queer words comin' from the lips o' Mexican Charlie."

The dark man started, flushed and reached for

his weapon, but thinking better of it, permitted his hand to slip back to its former position.

"I wants to know whar the boy is? Mex, I ask ye, whar is he?"

"I don't know."

"Ye lie, Mex! Yer too yellow to draw at thet word. Whar's my pard, Jim?"

"I tell you I don't know nothin' 'bout what yer talkin'," flung back Mexican Charlie.

"Ye lie twice, but yer too yellow to draw at thet word," reiterated Sam. "I knows thet the boy got away, but whar did he go?"

"Don't know nothin' 'bout it. Who be ye?"

"Leavin' the lie fer the moment, ye ought to know me, Charlie. You an' me has met afore, but a long time ago an' times has changed me, but yer the same low-down houn' thet ye always was. I've growed some fresh whiskers since ye last seen me, an' fer reasons. Look sharp, Mex! Look under the whiskers and mebby ye'll see a scar thar," urged the old guide, lifting his whiskers with the left hand. "Do ye see it, Mex?"

The mountaineer nodded, but he was puzzled. That scar seemed to bring back the past, but Mexican Charlie plainly could not fix the thing in his mind.

"Mex! Ye put thet scar thar. It was up in the Klondike years ago, and ye give it to me when I wasn't lookin'. Ye got away then an' ye know

why, cause my hand wasn't all crinkled up with the rheumatiz like it is now. But listen, Mex! I've been waitin' fer ye, knowin' thet some day you an' me would meet up with each other an' then we'd talk it all over nice an' friendly like. I didn't recognize ye when ye come to our camp t'other night an' told us ye come from Malcolm Hornby with orders fer us to git out 'cause we was on his property. Ye lied then, too, jest as you've been doin' tonight. Mex, I'm Sam Conifer! "

The announcement was like a blow in the face to Mexican Charlie. Mex knew his torturer now. To the others the announcement meant nothing except as they saw how nervous it had made their leader.

" Do ye know what I'm goin' to do now, Mex? " purred Sam.

" Yer goin' to git out o' here afore somebody shoots ye up! " shouted the mountaineer.

" Shore I be, but not yit. Fust, I'm goin' to give ye the same kind o' scar that ye give me up in the Klondike. Turn yer head round sideways jest as I was doin when ye give it to me," urged Sam gently.

" Yer wrong, pard. I ain't the man ye think I be. I never seen ye before," protested Charlie.

" I'm speakin' to ye, Charlie! Be ye goin' to turn yer head or must I turn it fer ye after I've put ye in condition to turn? "

"I'll kill ye fer this!" hissed the mountaineer. "Yer a coward, an' ye wouldn't dare talk to me like thet if things was equal.

"No, things ain't equal, eh? Heah ye be, six of ye an' I only one man; each of ye armed an' lookin' fer a chance to kill me, but not darin' to try it, though I ain't got a gun in my hand no more than ye fellers has. No, things ain't equal. Draw, ye sneakin' coyote! I'll not touch my gun till your'n is out o' the holster. Draw, you coward!"

Enraged beyond further endurance, and taking advantage of the visitor's apparent relaxation, Mexican Charlie snatched at his gun, fumbled it in his nervous excitement, then jerked it free.

Like a flash of light the nervous hand of Sam Conifer flicked his own weapon out and two guns roared, one a fraction of a second ahead of the other. Mexican Charlie clapped a hand to his neck, as his weapon fell to the floor.

"Steady, fellers! We ain't finished our little talk yit," warned Sam. "Mex's got it right whar he give it to me an' he don't like it. Neither did I. Tie yer handkerchief 'bout yer neck, Charlie, an' we'll finish what we got to say to each other, an' this time ye'll talk right out in meetin' cause thar's some things I've got to know, among them, who is bossin' this heah gang o' rustlers, an' hoss thieves, an' fellers thet —"

Sam did not finish his sentence. A rifle somewhere outside of the cabin roared, and the lantern swinging overhead crashed to the floor, leaving the room in sudden darkness.

Revolvers began to bark, weapons aimed at the spot where Sam Conifer had been standing. The firing was fast and furious for a moment, then the voice of Mexican Charlie was heard above the uproar.

"Git out! On the jump!" he shouted.

The rustlers made haste to obey, some going out by way of the door, others taking to the rear and out by the lean-to in which Stacy Brown had been held a captive.

A moment later Sam Conifer rose from the floor where he had thrown himself on the instant when the light went out, and stole out. Sam did not go far, only to the base of the granite slope, at one side of which he crouched down and waited. Sam could not understand that shot. Why, if it were a friend of the rustlers, did the fellow not shoot him instead of shooting out the light? After a time a light began to dawn on the old guide. He uttered a low whistle signal that had been agreed upon between himself and his companions.

The signal was properly answered.

"Come heah, but do it keerful like," ordered Conifer.

After a few seconds a voice called out softly. It was the voice of Two-gun Pete.

"Thet you, Sam?" asked Pete.

"Yes. Whar's that bunch o' ruffians?" demanded the guide.

"They've hit the trail on their ponies, an' some of 'em had to be helped into their saddles, I reckon. Our fellers aire back heah in the bushes. They was waitin' till I sized things up an' —"

"Look heah, Pete! Be you the critter thet shot out the light jest when I was holdin' a friendly conversation with thet bunch? Be you him?"

Pete admitted that he was the man.

"Thar was a feller in thar thet had his gun out and was gittin' ready to let you have it," explained Pete. "I reckoned thet I didn't want to kill the critter. Somehow I don't like to let go at a feller when he ain't lookin'. It ain't good sport; so I jest shot out the light, knowin' thet you'd be out of range instanter if things went off thar, which they did."

"Thet's what I calls a low-down trick, Pete. No gent would butt in when another gent is holdin' a private conversation, but I forgive ye. Lead me to our bunch. Be they all heah?"

Pete said they were, and conducted Sam to them. Tom, Hippy and Idaho eagerly plied the old guide with questions, all talking at the same

time. They conversed in low tones, for no one knew at what moment they might be overheard by mountain prowlers, for none had great faith in the flight of the men that Sam Conifer had held up. They were expected to return seeking for revenge.

Sam was troubled, though the Overlanders were happy in the thought that Stacy had escaped. They reasoned that by this time he must be well on his way to the Circle O ranch. Sam, on the other hand, was worried about Jim. He believed that Jim must be somewhere about, and, after a few moments' further conversation with his companions, started for a prowl about. In the meantime Two-gun and Idaho kept watch to guard against surprises.

The old guide's search lasted for more than an hour. Upon his return he announced that he couldn't find the slightest trace of Jim, and that he could do nothing more until daylight. The night passed without the party being disturbed, and with daylight all hands were out before breakfast continuing the search.

The cabin was the first object of their inquiry. After searching it and finding nothing of interest, except the message that Hippy had sent by one of the pigeons, they proceeded to the lean-to. The first object to interest them there was Stacy Brown's hat.

"I reckon the fat boy went away in a hurry," suggested Pete.

"An' somebody cut the ropes thet held him," added Idaho.

"He cut 'em hisself with the axe," averred Sam, whose eyes had taken in every detail in one sweeping glance. "I knowed the kid would fool 'em if he got half a chance. But whar's Jim? If they've done fer him I'll foller thet bunch till I gits every one of 'em, if it takes me all the rest of my life. But Jim ain't daid. I'll tell ye, Cap'n Gray, and all the rest of ye, I love thet pard o' mine like I never didn't love no one else."

"Then why do you fight each other all the time?" questioned Hippy laughingly.

"Why, ain't thet the way? What t'other way could a couple of fellers show thet they love each other? Ye wouldn't expect 'em to git mushy, would ye? No. Ain't no t'other way 'cept to arg'fy an' fit it out. Why, Jim an' me have got so het up now an' ag'in thet we drawed guns on each other, an' one time Jim shot at me, but thet critter never could shoot. All he kin do is to foller a trail, but thar ain't a man lives thet kin beat him at thet. The time he shot at me, I was so all-fired tickled to think I'd riled him till he drawed, thet I jest chucked my gun an' grabbed him an' hugged him till we both got to laughin'. Thet's the only time we ever come nigh gittin'

mushy like a couple o' gals," finished Conifer, who stroking his whiskers, turned and strode out to the edge of the gulch that dropped away at the rear of the lean-to.

Hippy looked at Tom and Tom looked at Hippy, then both burst into laughter.

"Can you beat it?" chuckled Hippy.

Tom Gray agreed that he could not. Sam was out of range of both their words or their laughter, absorbed in his study of the surrounding mountains and gorges. His forehead wore a heavy frown, and, as he looked he thought, with all the concentration that he could summon, trying to evolve a theory to find a solution of the mystery of his companion's disappearance. No answer came to him.

Two-gun Pete, who was listening to the conversation of the two Overland men, suddenly reared his head attentively.

"Did ye hear it?" he demanded.

The Overlanders nodded. The distant report of a rifle had been heard by all, but as there was no repetition of it they again fell to talking.

"Wha — at!" cried Lieutenant Wingate, springing to his feet when, a moment later, Sam Conifer came staggering in. "In the name of Mike, what's happened?"

The old guide's face was covered with blood from the forehead down, which served to accen-

tuate the pallor that showed in the narrow strip above it.

"Sam! What is it?" begged Tom Gray.

"Nothin' much 'cept—" The words ended in a moan, and old Sam Conifer, staggering forward a pace, crumpled down to the floor and lay still.

## CHAPTER XX

### STACY WIELDS A CLUB

STACY BROWN'S face wore a serious expression as his captors started away with him. His pony was free, but there were men ahead of and behind him, men whose faces were stern and threatening. The rifle had been taken from the boot of his saddle and his revolvers were gone. He was as helpless as a child, but the fat boy was watching for an opportunity to escape.

"Where are you taking me?" he demanded after they had galloped on for the better part of an hour.

"You'll see when you git thar," was the brief reply.

"You don't say," retorted Chunky, whereupon he was ordered to keep silent.

Soon after that a collection of ranch buildings was seen nestling below in the foothills, which were regarded with interest by the Overland boy as his captors headed for them. As they neared the ranch, a few men appeared and with shaded eyes watched the approach. When the captors finally pulled up before the ranch, a thin, tall, bronzed man came out and bent a keen gaze on Chunky.

"What have you got heah?" he demanded.

"Feller we caught with the mustang thet was stolen the other night," replied one of the captors.

"So? A hoss thief, eh?"

"I'm not!" objected the fat boy indignantly.

"So? Mebby he is your horse, eh?"

Stacy admitted that it was not his horse.

"Where did you get him?" snapped the rancher.

"I helped myself to him — took him because I wanted to get away from a bunch of ruffians."

"Where was that?"

Stacy said he didn't know, but that it was in the mountains on the edge of a red gulch, and further admitted that he didn't know much about the country there and would feel fully as well satisfied if he didn't know as much as he did.

"What's your name?"

"Name's Brown. What's yours?"

"I am William Crawley, the owner of this

ranch, and the pony you are on is my property. I don't suppose there is any use in questioning you, for a fellow who will rustle horses will lie as well as steal. I'll hear what you have to say, however."

"If you don't mind, suppose you untie me and let me get down. I don't like to be hung up this way 'cause it gets tiresome."

"I reckon you will have plenty of time to rest, young fellow," answered the rancher, grinning sardonically. "Let him down. Has he guns on him?"

A member of the party said that they had taken his weapons from the boy, and explained in detail how they happened to discover him helping himself to food in the chuck-house up on the range, to all of which Rancher Crawley listened attentively. He turned to Stacy again.

"Tell me what you wish about yourself and I'll listen," he said.

"What's the use? You won't believe me," protested Stacy.

"As you wish. It doesn't make much difference what you say. You will have to tell your story to the sheriff at Carrago, for we're going to send a man for him today."

"I belong to the Overland Riders. We ride somewhere every summer," began Stacy hurriedly. "This summer we chose the Bad Lands in the

Cosos, but I reckon that, had we known how bad they are, we should have stayed away. We have been hanging out with Joe Bindloss, and the rest of my party is over there now. We have a camp pitched just back of his house where the garden ought to be, but isn't."

"How about it, Skip?" interrupted the rancher, turning to one of his men. "You was over there this morning."

The man replied that there was no camp back of Bindloss's house, and that, further, no one was there when he dropped in.

Bill Crawley smiled sarcastically.

"You see! A hoss thief can't tell the truth," he reiterated.

"Neither can some other people," flung back Chunky heatedly. "I'm telling you the truth, and I don't care whether you believe me or not, but if you are half so smart as you think you are you will know that I am telling no lies. I don't have to be a horse thief. I've got money, I'd have you know."

"Most hoss thieves have," agreed one of the cowpunchers. "What were you doing in the mountains alone?"

Stacy, though weary and out of patience with all this, explained that while out with Bindloss's men on the round-up, he was roped and carried into the mountains where he was held prisoner

while a gang of rustlers tried to get his companions to pay a ransom for him. He told about the carrier pigeons, and the money that the ruffians had collected by means of the birds. As he talked the grins on the faces of the cowpunchers grew broader. They had never heard a fairy tale quite so ingenious. Bill Crawley's face wore an expression of weariness.

"Young fellow, I've heard some liars in my time, but you win!" he declared. "Take him over to the hay barn and lock him in. If he tries to get out, shoot him!"

"If you were alone with me you wouldn't dare say that, you bluffer!" retorted Chunky, his cheeks flushing with anger.

"What's that you say?" demanded the rancher, taking a step toward the boy, his chin thrust out belligerently.

"Oh, nothing much," muttered Stacy. "I reckon I was talking in my sleep."

"Lock him up. And, Skip! Get a bite to eat, then hit the trail for Carrago. You ought to get back some time tomorrow forenoon, but bring the sheriff with you. We've got one of the rustlers that have been stealing stock from us this summer, and, young fellow, we're going to send you to jail. You're lucky that you aren't shot!" was Crawley's parting word.

Stacy was yanked nearly off his feet by a cow-

puncher and hauled protesting to the barn, a structure that was built with the idea of keeping thieves from stealing from it. He was thrown violently to the floor as his jailer hurled him into the place, and the door was slammed behind him and locked.

There were tears of anger in the eyes of the fat boy as he sat up and rubbed himself.

"I wish I had a gun! Oh, I wish I had a gun!" he raged.

After the peak of his rage had been passed, Stacy began to take account of his surroundings. On either side of him were huge mows of hay already laid up for the stock that would have to be wintered on the ranch, but finally, weariness overcoming him, the Overland boy stretched out on the barn floor and went to sleep. He did not awaken until twilight when a boot, coming into violent contact with his person, brought him up, once more in a belligerent mood.

"Heah's yer chuck," announced the cowpuncher. "I hope it chokes ye!" added the man, backing out and locking the door.

The sight of food made Stacy forget his troubles for the time being, and he helped himself freely of the liberal meal. Upon second thought, the boy stowed part of the food in his pockets, thinking it might be useful later on, for he had hopes of making his escape.

After finishing his meal he climbed the ladder to the top of the hay loft and floundered about in the faint light for some time, hoping to find a window. There was none. Getting down, he tried the mow on the other side of the barn, but with no better results, whereupon Chunky returned to the floor and sat down, head in hands.

"Tomorrow, if I am here, I'll be on my way to jail," he reflected. "Of course it will all come out right. They won't keep me there long, but I don't like the idea of going to jail when there is so much going on over in the valley. Besides, a fellow doesn't get very good food in these western jails, so I've heard. I've got to get out of here. That's flat!"

The Overland boy got up and leaned against the hay wagon that stood on the barn floor. One hand came in contact with one of the pins, oak pins about a yard long, that keep the hay on the rack when loading. He pulled the pin out and felt over its entire length. It was smooth, worn so from long usage, and the feel of it was good to Stacy Brown. It was something that might be used for a weapon as well as a tool. With it he tried to pry open the barn door, but the door would not budge. Once more the fat boy was at the end of his resources, but as he stood leaning against the door, he heard some one fussing with the lock.

Stacy was instantly on the alert as some one opened the door.

"Hey, ye hoss thief! Whar be ye? The boss reckons as I'd better start for Carrago with ye now so as to git thar in the mornin' an' git back in good season."

"All right," replied the lad, yawning.

"What you doin' heah by the door?" demanded the man.

"Maybe I was trying to get out. What?" laughed the fat boy.

"I don't reckon as you'll be gittin' out till ye go with me, an' don't ye try any monkeyshines, 'cause I've got er gun in my hand an' I'll use it on ye, ye cheap rustler. Git 'round in front of me whar I kin see ye!"

"I'll bet you I get away," answered Chunky, "and I'll have the law on this outfit for what it has done to me!"

*Whack!* He brought the oak stick down on the head of the cowpuncher.

The fellow went down in a heap, whereupon Stacy Brown stepped out, closed and locked the door behind him and walked calmly away.

"When I get riled I'm a pretty bad man," admitted the Overland boy, chuckling to himself.

## CHAPTER XXI

### JUDY BRINGS TIDINGS

AT first the two Overland Riders in the mountain cabin thought Sam Conifer had been mortally wounded, but after they had pulled themselves together, washed his face and examined his wound, they decided that it might not be so serious after all. A bullet had laid about four inches of the forehead open, but did not seem to have done the skull injury.

Sam was placed on blankets in the cabin, and the two Overlanders worked over him until he regained consciousness. While they were doing this Two-gun Pete and Idaho, rifles in hands, skulked about outside, trying to discover the man who had fired the shot that got Sam. Not knowing what position the old guide was standing in when hit, they were unable to determine the direction from which the bullet had come, and were about to return to the cabin to see if Sam had come to, when Pete uttered a yell.

"Git down!" he shouted.

At the same instant, Idaho heard the report of

a rifle and threw himself down. Pete was already on the ground, hat in hand, and looking at it ruefully. He held it up for his companion to see.

"Put er hole plumb through it," he growled. "Thet miserable cayuse! I hope I git a squint at him over the sights of my rifle. But, man, he shore kin shoot!"

"Whar do ye think it come from?" asked Idaho Jones.

"From t'other side of the gulch. Must be usin' a telescope rifle, for no man with open sights could make two shots like thet. He might do it once, but not twice. I call thet some shootin'. No wonder he got old Sam. Ye keep watch. I'm going in to tell the Dude an' Cap'n Gray 'bout this heah," announced Pete, making a run for the protection of the rocks about the cabin.

He found Sam awake. The Overlanders had heard the shot, and met Pete with a quick inquiry about it. Two-gun Pete exhibited his hat as the answer to their question.

"I come in to ask 'bout Sam. I reckoned as mebby you'd like to have somebody go down to the valley an' git help fer him."

"Not unless you wish to get away from here, which I don't believe you do," replied Tom Gray.

"I reckon I don't — not onless it's to save a pard's life. Is he bad off — goin' to pass in?"

"No, I ain't, you miserable galoot!" answered

Sam Conifer heatedly. "I'm goin' out purty soon to hunt fer a man, an' when I finds him—"

"Not today, Samuel," differed Hippy.

"I be!" insisted the injured man.

"I reckon what the Boss says goes 'round heah," reminded Two-gun Pete. "I'll git out an' keep watch."

Soon after that Conifer, his head bandaged up as best the two men could do it, went to sleep, and the Overlanders fell to considering what they ought to do. They decided, in the first place, that Idaho and Pete should go out and make further search for Jim, following the direction taken by the outlaws when they rode away in such haste. Hippy thought that he and Tom could protect their camp and care for Sam at the same time, and perhaps, by the following day, there would be help from the Circle O ranch.

Tom reminded him, that, not knowing where they were, no assistance could be looked for from that direction. This had not occurred to Hippy.

Pete and Idaho did not return until just before dark. They had found not the slightest trace of the other guide, but they were delighted to see Sam sitting up. Nothing had been seen of the rustlers, but Two-gun Pete advised that the party move out of the cabin and go into camp farther up in the mountains, as otherwise they were more than likely to be attacked before morning.

Hippy and Tom moved Sam with some misgivings, but the old guide stood the ride without admitting the slightest suffering because of it. That night they made camp without building a fire, and lay down in the open, deciding that in the morning they would return to the cabin and again make it their headquarters while continuing the search for Jim.

In the meantime the long absence of the party was beginning to cause the Overland girls and Bindloss some worry, for not knowing where their companions had gone, it was not possible to get into communication with them.

By the following morning worry had grown into genuine alarm, and ways and means for doing something were discussed by the rancher and his guests. No conclusion was arrived at, but shortly after luncheon their hopes were raised by a dust cloud down the valley. The cloud soon grew into a horse and rider, and as it neared them the rider was recognized as Judy. She was coming fast — her mustang running at top speed.

"Judy's excited about something," said Bindloss, a frown wrinkling his forehead.

The same thought was in the mind of each Overland Rider. Perhaps Judy was bringing news from the party that went in search of Stacy and Jim.

The mountain girl indulged in no fancy horsemanship that afternoon. She rode straight up to the porch of the ranch-house and threw herself from the saddle.

"Give me a drink of water. I've swallered a quart of dust," was her greeting.

"Is — is anything wrong?" begged Nora.

"Mebby everythin' is. Hello, Pap Bindloss. Ain't grown any better lookin' since I was here, be you?"

"What's the matter, Judy?" he asked, ignoring her fling at him. "I know something is wrong."

She gave him a quick flashing look.

"You see too dad-gasted much for an old man. Ah-h-h-h! That water tastes good. Where's yer folks, Miss Gray?" she asked casually, and emptied the glass of water.

"They went into the mountains to look for Stacy Brown and Jim. We haven't seen them since, and we are worried," replied Grace.

"A-huh! How'd they know whar to go?"

No one answered, and Judy gave them a quick searching look.

"Tryin' to hide up on me, eh? Wal, I don't reckon as it's any good for you to do so, 'cause mebby I can tell ye some things that may be good fer ye to know."

"You know something about them, Judy?" demanded Miss Briggs.

"A-huh. Did they go up to Red Gulch?"

"Yes, yes!" cried the girls in chorus. "Judy, do you know where that place is?" questioned Emma.

"Reckon I could find it if I tried, but I don't reckon whether I want to try or not. It's a long, hard hike up thar, and thar won't be no picnic when you get thar. My Pap says it ain't a fit place fer folks to be, but Pap was mad with me afore he went away this mornin' and threatened to give me a punch in the jaw, but he changed his mind when I pulled my gun and told him to try it. Wal, Pap didn't. He went away madder'n a busting bronco. Said he wouldn't be back fer a few days. He said some things 'bout ye folks that I don't 'low nobody to say 'bout my friends, an' I said so right out in meetin', and added a few other things, and that started the row. Say, I got some news fer you folks."

"Then for heaven's sake tell it!" begged Emma. "You are killing us with suspense."

"I reckoned that way," nodded the girl. "Wal, I heard it this mornin' fer the first time, 'bout your folks goin' up in the mountains, and why they went thar and all 'bout it. Funny, wasn't it, that I should hear it? I ain't going to tell you whar I heard it, but I did. You don't reckon anythin' happened to them, do you, Pap Bindloss?"

"Judy, I think you can answer that question, and that you have come here to help my friends," replied the rancher.

"Fer why do ye think that?"

The rancher pointed to the rifle in Judy's saddle boot.

"Are you going hunting, Judy?" he asked significantly.

Judy flushed and turned to the girls.

"I reckon I better tell ye now what I come heah to say — what I heard this mornin'. Wal, it was this way: Your folks and some rustlers had a fight in the mountains last night. It warn't much of a fight, but I heard that Sam Conifer had been killed and thet Miss Gray's husband and Hippy had been shot and that there was liable to be trouble at Red Gulch, and I reckoned that I was your friend and that you folks needed a friend right now, and that's why Judy Hornby is heah."

Nora Wingate, uttering a moan, toppled over in a swoon, the other Overland girls gazing at the mountain girl in a stunned sort of way, while Judy fumbled awkwardly with her sombrero.

## CHAPTER XXII

### RIDERS OF THE NIGHT

NO heed was given to Nora Wingate's faint, and for several seconds no one spoke.

"Gosh a-mighty!" exploded Joe Bindloss.

"Judy, are you positive that your information is correct?" asked Grace in a voice well under control.

"Ain't positive of nothin'. Be you?"

Grace shook her head and smiled faintly.

"Mr. Bindloss, of course we shall have to go. None of us can stay back now. Judy, will you guide us to the Red Gulch section?"

"That's what I'm heah for, Miss Gray. I reckoned as you'd be doin' jest that. If I had a man I'll bet I'd hit the trail fer him when I heard he was in a mess. How did yours ever git up to Red Gulch?"

"He followed the pigeons," answered Grace.

"A-huh!"

Joe Bindloss, at this juncture, announced his intention of accompanying the Overlanders into

the mountains. He did not know where Red Gulch was, but if Judy said she knew, that settled it. The girls brightened at his suggestion, and Nora sat up pale and trembling, asking what had happened.

She was told that she had fainted. Grace turned to Judy and asked if they were to start at once, but the mountain girl shook her head.

"We got to wait till night and make a night ride," she said. "Pap Bindloss knows why."

"Oh, I can't wait!" wailed Nora.

"Judy is right," spoke up the ranchman. "Besides, we have some things to do here. I can't spare any men from the range, so we shall have to do the work ourselves. We must break your camp and store your equipment, for the rustlers will discover, after we leave here, that the ranch is unguarded and come down on it. Understand?"

Grace nodded. Judy tethered her pony and announced that she would assist them, and the work of striking the Overland camp began. The equipment was packed for moving, but instead of being lashed to the backs of mustangs, Joe Bindloss carted it to the ranch-house on his buckboard. The work took a good part of the afternoon, following which the rancher rode out to his nearest grazing grounds where he acquainted one of his foremen with the situation.

Judy Hornby not only did her share of the work, but kept up the spirits of her companions with quaint sayings and sharp-witted replies to questions.

Food sufficient for their needs was packed, and by supper time all was in readiness for the start. Before leaving, the mountain girl and the rancher held a brief consultation, at which she told him of her plan. Bindloss agreed to it. Up to this time Judy had given her friends no further information as to the source of the news that had come to her, though occasional attempts had been made by Grace and Elfreda to draw it from her.

The start was made shortly after dark, the riders setting out in pairs at some little distance apart. Judy kept to the base of the foothills where the mountains cast a heavy shadow so that the movements of the party could not be seen from the valley in the light of the new moon. Instead of riding directly into the hills, the mountain girl rode parallel with them for fully five miles. Grace asked her why she did this instead of taking the direct line that had been followed by the carrier pigeons.

"Mebby that trail is watched," answered Judy. "We got to go 'round and come up by a longer way. You folks leave that to me. I ain't sayin' that we ain't goin' to be caught, but if we are we got rifles and I knows how to use mine.

"So do we," returned Grace. "I hope it may not be necessary, though."

Finally a sharp turn into the mountains was made, and for a mile or two Judy followed a gash in the hills.

"We got to climb now," finally announced their guide, and it proved to be a real climb. A brief halt was made to rest the animals, after which the journey was resumed. The going from there on was over rough ground, and it was a marvel to the Overland Riders how Judy Hornby picked her way in the darkness and kept in the right direction.

As a matter of fact Judy was using the stars for her guide, which enabled her to follow the general direction in which she wanted to go.

Another halt was made at midnight. The girls were shivering, and Emma asked if they could not build a fire and warm up.

"No! You'll git warmed up before you git through with this," answered Judy. "Might git warm most any time now."

No halt was made from that time until just at break of day. Then Judy left the party for half an hour to take an observation. She returned briskly and announced that they could make a small fire and have coffee, but she built the fire herself, being careful not to make enough smoke to attract attention.

"Folks, we aire within a mile of the Red Gulch, and I reckon you better keep your eyes open from now on. I'll ride on ahead, so watch me. Pap Bindloss, you watch the sides and the trail behind. Nobody do any loud talkin'," advised Judy, after they had warmed their hands by the little cook-fire, and drunk their hot coffee. All mounted and rode away much refreshed, and with a gentle glow now suffusing their bodies.

The Overlanders now observed that Judy had unlimbered her rifle, so they did the same, carrying their weapons resting across their saddles, gun-butts to the right. Judy wound in and out among the rocks and trees, sometimes being out of sight for a moment or two, then coming into view again, until finally she held up her hand and sat listening. The others halted near where her pony stood nibbling at the green leaves within its reach.

"You all stay right heah. I'm going on to scout 'round a little. Pap, you stay with the girls." Judy tossed her bridle-rein to him and slid from her saddle, taking her rifle with her. She was out of sight in a few moments, and the Overland Riders sat in uneasy silence straining their ears for warning sounds.

When Judy returned her face wore a perplexed expression.

"Folks, they ain't there."

"Aren't where?" asked Miss Briggs.

"Whar they was supposed to be. I got a good look at the cabin, but couldn't see nobody, an' couldn't find any ponies anywhar 'bout, though I see whar they'd been tethered. Would you folks know the tracks of yer horses?"

Grace said she did not think they would, not having had these animals long enough to be familiar with them.

"I can pick 'em out," volunteered Bindloss.

"Good! Come with me. You folks kin ride up so you kin see the place whar the cabin is an'—"

"What cabin?" questioned Emma.

"One of the places whar the rustlers hang out, an' whar I reckons that battle was fought. But you got to keep quiet."

Bindloss dismounted and followed the girl, leaving the Overlanders alone and very much worried. The couple were gone for some time; then the Riders saw them returning, the rancher striding rapidly along, Judy following him thoughtfully.

"They've gone, folks!" he announced. "Neither hide nor hair of them left. I got into the cabin, and there was bullet holes, fresh ones, showing that there had been some shooting there. I reckon there was blood on the floor. It looked like it."

"Anything else?" asked Grace, regarding him keenly.

"Nothing like what you mean," answered Bindloss understandingly. "I found the tracks of my ponies, and we ain't far from their trail right this minute. It looks to me as if your party has headed for home, and Judy agrees with me. There was five ponies in that bunch and they was all mine. That looks mighty queer to me."

"Is it not possible that it was not our friends who were riding the animals?" asked Miss Briggs.

"I reckon so," returned the rancher absently. "However, there's only one thing for us to do, and that is to follow the tracks and watch out."

While he was speaking, Judy had started off on foot. She was gone for some time. Upon her return she announced that she had picked up the trail, and mounting, she directed her companions to fall in behind her. Bindloss rode a little to one side of the mountain girl, and in a few minutes she pointed out the trail to him. He got down to examine it, and said the faint hoof-prints were those of ponies from his corral.

From that time on fairly rapid progress was made, until the trail grew more difficult to follow. There were straggling cedars about them and on beyond a forest of pines that formed a great green canopy. The season had been dry and the long mountain grass under the sun's rays had burned

to a dull brown, but the grass was tough and traveling through it made it necessary for the ponies to lift their feet high, giving a jolting effect to the riders that was extremely trying.

Bindloss suddenly halted.

"I hear shooting!" he exclaimed.

"So do I," agreed Grace.

The reports sounded far away, but Bindloss and Judy knew that the firing was not so far away as the Overlanders believed.

"Do you know where you are — do you know the mountains here?" asked the rancher.

Judy shook her head and said she had never been so far into the mountain country before, but that she had a general idea of where they were. Suddenly she wheeled her pony and started away towards the scene of the firing, as well as she was able to locate it. The others followed, each with straining ears and tingling nerves. They were soon rewarded by the realization that they were rapidly approaching the gunfire. Bindloss halted them with a gesture, and sat listening. The party was only now at the edge of the pine forest along which they had been skirting, but there were pines to the right and left of them, beautiful, fragrant pines, nodding to the stiff mountain breeze that was blowing. The wind died down, then sprang up again from a different direction.

Judy's mustang whirled, threw up its head and snorted, and the pony ridden by the rancher began to buck under the restraining grip on the bridle-rein and sundry jabs from the spur, while the mounts of the Overlanders showed signs of panic.

A moment more and every mustang in the party was sniffing the air and snorting. Bindloss, leaning forward in his saddle, gazing back over the ground that they had covered, saw that a curtain of bluish shade had been drawn over their late trail. The curtain was quivering, punctuated here and there by faint spurts of red.

Judy Hornby's mustang uttered a whistling blast of fear, and reared on its hind legs.

"Fire!" cried the mountain girl. "They've set the grass on fire!"

"Ride!" yelled Joe Bindloss. "It's coming fast!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

### RACING WITH DEATH

NONE knew better than the rancher and the mountain girl the peril that lay behind that waving, quivering blue haze. The only avenue open to them lay by way of the dark aisles between the pines, for the blue haze, as they quickly discovered, had crept up on either side as well as to the rear of them.

"Into the forest!" shouted Bindloss, giving his pony rein, while Judy held in her bucking mount until her companions got under way.

The Overland girls were too frightened to start, but their mustangs, taking matters into their own hands, lunged forward and were in amongst the pines a few seconds later, dodging here and there to avoid trees, until their riders were clinging with knees and hands to keep from being unseated.

A thin streak of yellow smoke wriggled overhead, followed by a crackling, hissing sound, and the wind whipping in the tree tops carried the smoke on ahead. The fire had overtaken them,

had run up the trunks of the trees at the edge of the forest, and was leaping from tree to tree over the heads of the Overland Riders, while here and there to the rear great pines exploded with terrifying sounds.

The Overland Riders, despite their torturing fear, were thrilled. The blood beat in their temples and their hearts were pounding. They began to understand what this race meant — it was a race with death, and its long arms were waving above them waiting to swoop down and enfold its victims.

"Faster!" Judy's shrill command was plainly heard above the roar. She turned in her saddle and beckoned to her companions, not certain that they had heard. It was then she saw that the haze was enveloping them and that the outlines of horses and riders were growing fainter. Judy reined in her mount and waited.

"Ride faster! Use the spur! Drive 'em! Drive 'em!" she yelled as the girls swept past her, each one now urging on her mount with sharp cries. The riders now plainly felt the heat, the breath of the fire on their cheeks. So did the horses feel it, and they were frantic.

The tough little mustangs as they swept on needed no urging. They were giving all that was in them to save their own lives, but it seemed to be an unequal battle. The Overland

Riders were not panic-stricken, but a great fear was in their hearts, yet not one gave way to her feelings. Perhaps it was because they had no time to do so, for it required close attention to prevent being unhorsed as their ponies made sudden swerves to avoid fallen trees or low-hanging branches. The Overland girls were thus kept fully occupied, and it was plain to Judy Hornby that they were in no danger of losing their heads.

Above the noise, she and Bindloss again heard the crack of rifles. It was a scattering fire, but it was fast. Occasionally an interval would occur, during which the firing seemed to cease, to be resumed again a moment later.

"They are riding ahead of us. Look out!" shouted the rancher, swerving close to the mountain girl.

Judy nodded, and spurred on until she was abreast of the racing pony of Elfreda Briggs, who had lost her hat, and whose hair was whipping in the air behind her.

"Something going on ahead! Watch out! Watch me fer orders. Tell the others. I got to git ahead ag'in," directed Judy.

Elfreda shouted the message to Grace, and Grace passed it to the girl nearest to her, which proved to be Emma. Nora was too far to one side to be reached, but her pony could be trusted

"Ride Faster! Drive 'Em!"

to follow the others if any radical change of direction were taken.

Daylight suddenly showed faintly through the haze — the light of an open space. Joe Bindloss uttered a yell, hoping that they might there find rock footing and an end of the fire. Instead, his mustang burst out into a vast brown field, a grazing ground many acres in extent, from which rugged passes branched out in the distance.

As the riders emerged close on the heels of the rancher and Judy, a scene met their gaze that thrilled them anew.

Two bodies of horsemen, like themselves, were fleeing from the fire, which for some unknown reason had not yet leaped into the brown grass of the grazing range, and as they rode, both bodies of men were shooting.

It was a battle, a running battle with rifles.

Judy in one quick glance comprehended the situation and she saw more than did any others of her party. She knew the men off there were part of the band of rustlers who for so long had been a thorn in the side of all honest ranchers in the two great grazing valleys of the Cosos. She saw more than that — the verification of suspicions that she had harbored for some time, but that had crystallized only twenty-four hours before.

At about the same instant the Overlanders also

made a discovery. The party of horsemen directly in front of them were quickly identified.

"It's the boys!" screamed Nora.

"Ain't dead, neither," cried Joe Bindloss.

The Overland Riders pulled down their ponies.

"Keep going!" roared Bindloss.

"If we do we shall be shot!" wailed Nora.

"If you don't you'll be roasted!" retorted the old ranchman.

It was a difficult choice. To go forward meant that the Overland party would place themselves directly in the line of fire of the mountain ruffians, but to hold back meant that the forest fire in a few moments would be sweeping over the field. They decided to go forward, and in a moment their ponies were racing towards Tom Gray and his companions.

The fire was now roaring across the brown meadow. The Overland men saw it and began drawing in on the rustlers, driving at them in an oblique line, firing as they put their ponies at top speed. The girls followed at one side of the line of fire, hoping thereby to escape being hit.

A rustler toppled from his saddle. At the same instant Idaho Jones swayed uncertainly in his, but quickly recovered and again began working his rifle. Those who saw his hesitation knew that he had been hit.

The rustlers were now in a thick haze, and were

giving ground as the ranchmen and Overland men bore down on them, pouring a heavy rifle fire into the closely bunched outlaws. They saw the rustlers whirl about facing their assailants to make a stand, but the firing was too hot for them and they fled. A mighty yell rose from the rustlers as all but two of them suddenly disappeared from sight as if the earth had swallowed them. It was then that the pursuers discovered that their adversaries had gained rocky ground. No forest fire could reach them there.

The two men who were still in view pulled their ponies to their haunches and swung about facing each other. The pursuers were amazed to see both men draw their weapons and begin shooting at each other.

The Overland men and ranchmen instantly ceased firing, but continued on at full speed, for the flames were rapidly sweeping down on them. They had not yet discovered the presence of Judy and the Overland girls, but Judy had discovered that safety from the fire lay at the far side of the field, so waving a hand for her companions to follow she headed towards the scene of the savage duel.

"Oh, it is awful!" cried Emma as her pony streaked past Miss Briggs and Grace.

Judy was laying her crop over the flank of her mustang and uttering shrill cries to urge him on,

and the first intimation that the ranchmen had of the presence of the Overland girls was when Judy flashed by them towards the duelists.

"Kill 'im, Pap!" she yelled.

"It's Mex!" shouted Sam Conifer.

At this juncture the Overland girls caught up with the pursuers and dashed to safety on the rocky ground. As they reached it Miss Briggs' pony went down and Grace's mustang leaped clear over her and her mount before she could check him. Tom Gray hurried to the rescue of Elfreda.

"You here?" he cried.

The roar of the fire, as it swept past over the brown meadow, smothered the words.

One duelist, at this juncture, was seen to sway in his saddle, and at the same instant the other plunged headlong to the ground. The first man's pony jumped and he too was unhorsed, then both duelists laboriously raised themselves to their elbows, and the duel was resumed. At the second exchange of shots, one sank back and lay still.

Judy jumped her pony forward, and throwing herself from the saddle ran to the living man and pillowed his head in her lap.

"Gosh a-mighty!" roared Bindloss.

The men of the ranch party were on the scene in a few seconds, but still being ignorant of the cause of the sudden disappearance of the body of

rustlers kept their weapons at ready. Some of them now rode cautiously forward to see what had become of the missing men.

"Stop!" shouted Two-gun Pete. "I know whar they've went to. The gang forgot 'bout the gulch thar, if they knowed 'bout it at all. Leastwise, they didn't see it in the smoke till it war too late, an' over they went. They won't rustle no more steers, I reckons, bad luck to 'em."

The whole party was now gathered about the mountain girl. The dead man, those who now knew him, was identified as Mexican Charlie.

"It's Pap," said Judy when they peered down into the face of the man whose head lay in her lap. She gazed up at the Overland girls with a pitiful look in her face.

Hornby opened his eyes, recognized her and began to speak.

"That's all right, Pap. Don't say it," begged Judy.

"I got ter talk, Kid. I'm sorry I made ye mad yesterday. I told ye thet them friends of yours war shot at Red Gulch 'cause I knew the rest of their gang would be up heah, an' we'd git 'em all. I wish we had! I wish we had, but the boys got looney 'cause your friends could shoot better'n they could, and ran over the edge."

"Why did you an' Mex fight, Pap?" asked Judy.

"'Cause he said I'd double-crossed him, an' sent his gang to death to git rid of 'em, too. Then we fit. He set the fire, but I told him to."

"Oh, Pap! How could you? These folks ain't never meant you no harm. They ain't done nothin' but fight when you made 'em," protested the mountain girl.

"Yes, they did! They come up heah lookin' fer trouble. They wanted to drive us out er business. I know 'cause I had it from a feller who knowed. An' ye helped 'em, Judy!" he exclaimed, blazing up into her face with something of the old fire in his eyes.

"You bet I did, Pap. My friends is my friends, an' I'd do it ag'in," she answered calmly.

"I don't bear ye no grudge fer thet now, Kid, 'cause it's too late. I got mine this time, an' I'm goin' out the way I always reckoned I would, with my boots on an' facin' the crack o' the guns."

As he talked, Hornby's voice grew halting, and there were pauses of a few seconds between words. It was plain to all that he was weakening fast.

"May I try to do something for him, Judy?" begged Miss Briggs gently, as she bent over the wounded rustler.

"*No!*" Hornby put all the strength that he could summon into that one word. "Ye been lookin' fer the man who war the leader of the

rustlers. Heah he is! I'm thet man, and as it's my dyin' words, I beat 'em all at the game. Git ba — ack thar!" The rustler groped with uncertain fingers for his weapon, whereupon Judy laid a firm hand on his arm.

"No, Pap! You've done enough," rebuked the girl. "You've said enough, too, an' Judy Hornby never again kin hold her head up nor look honest folks in the face. They'll say her Pap was a rustler an' — an' — "

"Judy! Please don't," begged Grace. "He is dying!"

"I — I reckon you're right." Judy fell to stroking the outlaw's hair. "That's all right, Pap. You're my Pap. Miss Gray is right."

"No! I got ter tell ye while I can. Judy, I ain't yer Pap. Nor yer mother warn't yer mother. I stole ye when ye war a little thing cause the man who was yer Pap had done me dirt. We raised ye, an' Judy, we havin' no children of our own, begun to like ye fer yerself an' we kept ye, though at first we didn't reckon on doin' jest that. We reckoned on gettin' rid — "

"No — ot my Pap?" stammered the girl. "Who, then — who is my Pap?" cried Judy. "Tell me! Ye got ter tell me! Who is my Pap?" Her voice rose threateningly, then sank almost to a whisper. "Pap, dear! Who is my real Pap?"

"He — he — he war — "

The voice grew faint, and though the girl bent her ear close to the lips of the dying man, she failed to catch the whispered words, and the secret that Malcolm Hornby had kept for so many years died with him there by the scorched meadows of the Cosos over which, like a shroud, hung a suffocating pall of yellow smoke.

Old Joe Bindloss lifted the little mountain girl to her feet, and, with hands on her shoulders, brought her face to face with him.

"I ain't got no Pap now," she murmured. "I ain't got no friends, no nothin' that a girl wants so much."

Grace Harlowe slipped an arm about her.

"Yes, you have, Judy. We are your friends, now and always," said Grace gently. "And I think you have a Pap that you haven't reckoned on," she added, nodding towards Joe Bindloss.

For a moment the old rancher and the mountain girl stood gazing into each other's eyes, then he drew her, unresisting, to him and lightly touched her forehead with his lips.

"Oh, Pap!" sobbed Judy, her arms slipping about the neck of Old Joe Bindloss as she buried her head on his shoulder.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### FAREWELL TO THE COSOS

THE Overland Riders and the men from the Circle O ranch walked to the edge of the precipice and looked down. The girls shivered and quickly turned, facing the other way, while the men gazed solemnly into the abyss.

"How'dy, folks," greeted Jim. "Ain't seen ye fer a week o' Sundays. Ye see that no 'count pard o' mine got his'n," he chuckled, nodding at Sam, whose head was still swathed in bandages.

"Yes, but what happened to you?" questioned Emma. "It would appear that you too got something."

Jim explained that he had been roped from his pony, carried into the mountains and secreted in a cave where the pigeon cotes were located. It was the wire-covered pigeon-yard just outside of the cave, well masked with foliage, that the Overland men and the ranchers, in their hunt for Jim, had stumbled upon, and that led to finding the missing guide. That was where the outlaws

caught them, and, had not the men from the ranch been on the alert, would have made a quick finish of them.

Tom told the Overlanders of Sam's battle with the rustlers in the mountain cabin, of the further search for Jim, and of the culminating experience when a running battle with the rustlers was engaged in.

"Stacy!" cried Nora in sudden recollection. In the excitement of that memorable morning she had forgotten about the fat boy.

"He got away the night we come up heah," Sam Conifer informed her. "I reckons he's got home afore this, an' that he'll stay thar. They was goin' to drop him into Red Gulch, an' I reckon he thought it war time to leave."

At this juncture, Miss Briggs asked permission to look at the wounds of the party. Sam's wounds were doing well, but needed professional care, which Elfreda gave to them on the spot. She next dressed Idaho Jones' arm, which was bleeding from a bullet wound. Barring a few slight flesh wounds where bullets had narrowly missed doing serious injury, the other fighters were unharmed.

"You now have the whole story," announced Tom Gray, as she finished. "The rustlers, thanks to their own carelessness, have taken a bad job out of our hands."

"What a terrible death!" breathed Grace. "What about these?" she added, pointing to Mexican Charlie and Malcolm Hornby. "Shall I consult Judy about — about her fa — about Hornby?"

Tom shook his head.

"You girls go on and take care of her. We will do all that is necessary to be done," he made reply.

The Overland girls returned to Bindloss and the mountain girl, who was clinging to the hand of the old rancher, a deep pallor showing under the tan on her face. Emma slipped a hand into hers, and Judy turned a wan face to the little Overland girl, but the face wore a faint smile.

"It's all fixed, Emma," she said, nodding. "I'm Judy Bindloss now. Leastwise I'm goin' to be as soon as my new Pap kin git the papers made out. I don't see no reason fer doin' that, do you?"

Miss Briggs, as a lawyer, tried to explain to her why it was very necessary, but the mountain girl shook her head.

"He's my Pap. It seems like he always was and no papers can't make him more so. Pap, let's go home."

The ponies were led along for some distance, to give them rest while the party were talking, and for the further purpose of giving the men

back there opportunity to do their work and join the Overland Riders.

The party finally being complete, Pete led the way across the blackened landscape to the old cabin. Reaching there, they laid up for a rest, and after luncheon Judy told them the story of her father, Malcolm Hornby, so far as she knew it.

Certain recent occurrences had made her suspect that Hornby was in league with the rustlers, but the night before she brought warning to the Overland girls that Tom and Hippy were wounded, she heard a conversation between her father and Mexican Charlie in which her suspicion became a certainty. From that conversation she learned that much stock had been stolen from Bindloss, and that by making a "Q" out of the Circle O ranch brand and adding another "Q," the marking conformed with Hornby's brand, after which the stolen cattle were added to his own herd. He had, with the assistance of the mountain ruffians, carried on wholesale thievery in two great valleys for several years and made money. His reward had been reaped that day, and it had been coming for some time, because Mexican Charlie and he were rapidly nearing the breaking point just before the last attack on the Overland Riders, who were the indirect cause of breaking up the gang of mountain ruffians.

That there were others of the gang still at large the ranchmen knew, but Judy could give them no information on this point. It was decided, therefore, to ask the aid of the sheriff and his deputies, as well as that of other ranchers, to form a big party and comb the mountains for the other ruffians, who, now that the backbone of the band had been broken, could be driven more easily from that region, and perhaps some of them captured.

In the early afternoon the journey home was begun. Judy did not accompany them all the way, saying that she wished to stop at her former home and get some personal belongings, she promising to ride back to the Circle O ranch on the following morning. Judy wished to be alone that night, and the Overland girls, at least, understood.

Circle O was reached before dark, and Stacy Brown, who had gained entrance to the ranch-house, which he had reached only a few hours before, met them at the door. The "fat boy" was thin, there were hollows in his cheeks, and a livid mark on the left cheek where a bullet had left its trail.

Stacy had been hunted all the way across the mountains, and shot at on several occasions, but had always outwitted his pursuers until finally they gave up the man-hunt and returned to the

Diamond Bar ranch. Hungry and worn out and after considerable suffering he finally reached Circle O only to find it deserted and the Overland camp broken up.

Now, however, that the opportunity was at hand to glorify his own achievements, Stacy Brown made the most of it, and out in the yard in front of the ranch-house, he declaimed loudly on his own prowess in fooling his pursuers.

Stacy was still engaged in this before an interested audience when a rider approached from the valley, but no one gave heed to him, believing him to be one of Bindloss's men. The rider dismounted at the stable and walked towards the group, his eyes fixed on Chunky. He halted just behind the boy and stood regarding him frowningly.

"Well, sir, what is it?" demanded Joe Bindloss sharply.

Stacy, in the midst of a loud boast, turned to look at the man behind him. The words died on his lips as he came face to face with the newcomer. It was Skip, the fellow on whose head Stacy had brought down the wagon stake at the Diamond Bar ranch.

The Overland boy's face grew a shade paler, and he made a move as if to run, but the pressure of a revolver against his stomach sent the shivers up and down his back and literally froze him.

"Here! Here!" roared Joe Bindloss. "What do ye mean?"

"This feller's a hoss thief. We kotched him on a hoss that had been rustled from the Diamond Bar ranch. He got away by cloutin' me over the haid. We follered, but he was too slippery fer us. I been lookin' fer him ever since, an' now I've got him!"

"Put down thet gun, pard!" drawled Sam Conifer, and Skip found himself gazing at the muzzle of the old guide's weapon. "Put it down, I says!"

The caller shoved his weapon into its holster, and Stacy Brown drew a long breath of relief and then quickly stepped back a few paces.

"This man is no more a thief than you are!" exploded Bindloss. "He is one of my friends, and that's all there is to it."

"I got to take him back," persisted Skip stubbornly.

"Listen to me, young fellow!" commanded Bindloss, who thereupon repeated the story that Chunky had told them, adding further information of his own.

"Thet's what the critter told us back at the ranch. We reckoned he lied, an' I reckon so too."

"Drop thet talk!" warned Sam Conifer.

Joe Bindloss after some farther argument told the visitor that he would write a letter to Bill

Crawley, owner of the Diamond Bar ranch, fully explaining the matter, but in no circumstances would Skip be permitted to take Stacy with him.

"And that's flat!" finished the rancher sternly.

"Thet's all right, Boss, but what 'bout this?" he demanded, exhibiting the lump that Stacy had left on the top of his head. "I got ter have satersfaction fer thet, I reckon."

"I'll hit it again if you say so," offered Stacy, but the boy met a quick rebuke from his companions.

"Look here, my man! How much do you want for satisfaction?" interjected Tom Gray.

"Wal, I reckon 'bout two bucks 'll satersfy me," answered Skip, tenderly caressing the lump.

"Stacy, shell out! Give the man two dollars," ordered Lieutenant Wingate. Stacy demurred, but there was no avoiding payment. He tried to borrow the money, but not one of the Overlanders would give him a cent, so Stacy Brown reluctantly parted with two silver dollars.

The letter was written by Grace at Bindloss's dictation, and half an hour later Skip headed back towards the Diamond Bar ranch, not only with the letter and two silver dollars in his pocket, but with a request from Bindloss that Bill Crawley and his men join with the Circle O men in making a final drive on the rustlers.

It was early to bed that night at the Circle O, for all hands were worn out. On the following morning the girls had a long talk with Joe Bindloss. It was decided that the Overlanders should remain at the ranch while the ranchers drove out the last of the rustlers.

Judy came in in time for luncheon that day. The girls saw that she had been weeping, but made no comment. It was then that they broached the subject that had been discussed with Judy's new "Pap." Grace and Elfreda wished to take her back east with them and show her some of the world that she had so often dreamed of seeing.

At first Judy was obdurate, but the thought grew and Bindloss urged, so, before the departure of the Overlanders two weeks later, Judy had said "yes."

The drive of the ranchers proved successful in ridding the Cosos of rustlers, though only one man was captured. The others had fled, following the disaster to Hornby and his immediate gang, and the drive of the ranchers.

The journey of the Overland party, following the recovery of Hippy and Sam from their wounds, lasted until mid-September when the great day in Judy's life arrived. The Overland Riders had returned to the ranch to pick her up, and to

arrange for returning Joe Bindloss's ponies to him at the railroad station, and, after a day's rest at the ranch-house, they set out for the east — and home. Judy wavered at the last moment, but finally rode away with her friends, waving her sombrero to the rugged old rancher, and trying to laugh through her tears. The world that Judy had so yearned for lay just before her, and after a winter with the Overland girls she was destined to return much benefited in every way, but with a fuller realization that her duty to herself and to her new "Pap" lay in the beautiful Valley of the Cosos.

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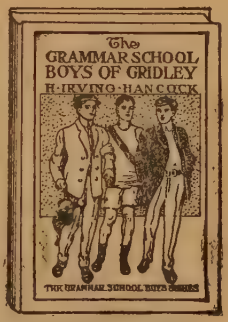


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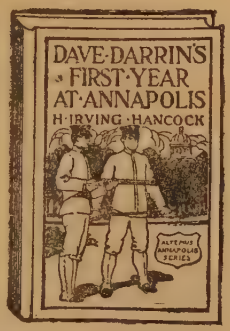


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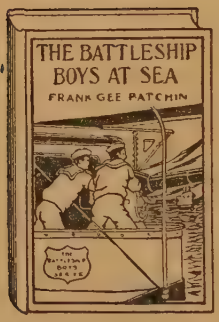


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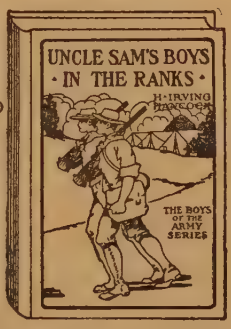


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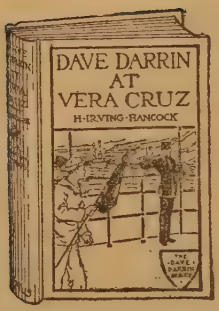


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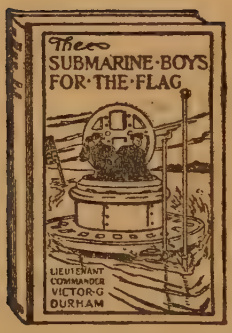


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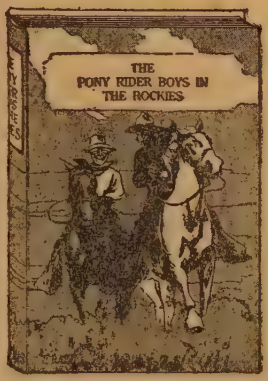


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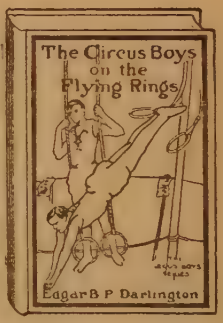


No call to the heart of the youth of America finds a readier response than the call of the billowing canvas, the big red wagons, the crash of the circus band and the trill of the ringmaster's whistle. It is a call that captures the imagination of old and young alike, and so do the books of this series capture and enthrall the reader, for they were written by one who, besides wielding a master pen, has followed the sawdust trail from coast to coast, who knows the circus people and the sturdy manliness of those who do and dare for the entertainment of millions of circus-goers when the grass is green. Mr. Darlington paints a true picture of the circus life.

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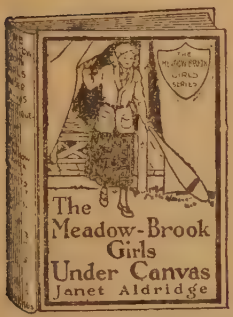


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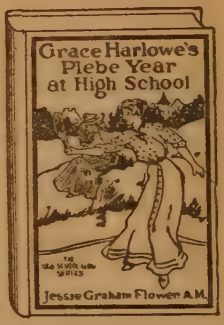


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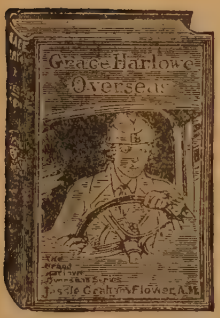


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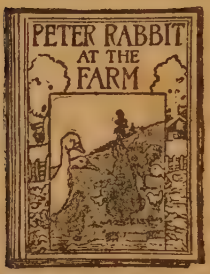


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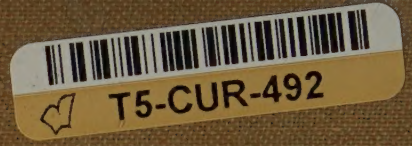
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